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RANCH ROMANCES

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A THRILLING PUBLICATION

SECOND FEBRUARY NUMBER

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BEGINNING

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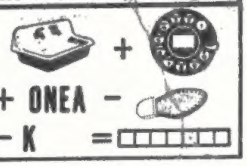

You will see there are a SINK, a DIAL, the SOLE of a shoe and various letters of the alphabet. There are two plus and two minus signs. It is necessary to add and subtract the names and letters as shown by the plus and minus signs. First, write down SINK. Then, add DIAL to it. Next, add ONEA. All this equals SINKDIALONEA. Now, you must subtract the letters in SOLE and K. When this is done you are left with INDIANA. Indiana is the Hoosier State, so the result checks with Clue No. 1.

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31st Year
OF PUBLICATION

SECOND
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February 11, 1955
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RANCH ROMANCES

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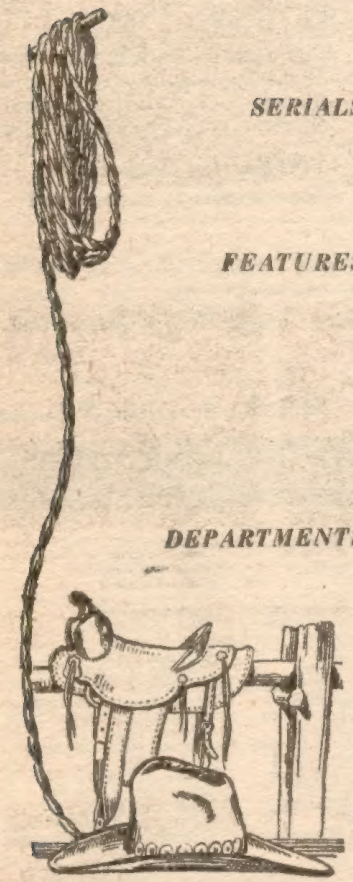

HELEN TONO
Editor

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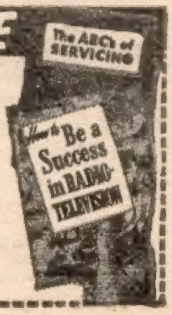

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A True Friend Is Wanted

Dear Editor:

I am a married woman who would like to correspond with other women. I am 59 years old, 5'6" tall, weigh 150 lbs., and am French-American. I would like to write to people of any age, anywhere. I like to feel that my letters are cheering and benefiting some one who likes to write. So come on, you ladies, and write.

MRS. J. CARPENTER

1411 Race Street,
Kalamazoo, Mich.

Lonely Marine

Dear Editor:

I am a lonely marine in Korea who doesn't receive any mail. I have black hair, gray eyes, am 5'6" tall, weigh 130 lbs, and am 18 years old. I would appreciate any women up to 25 years of age writing me.

PVT. EDWARD PERDUE
1455176 U.S.M.C.
G. Co. Rockets, 3BN. 5th MAS. WES.
1st Division, C/O FPO.
San Francisco, Calif.

Green-Eyed Gal

Dear Editor:

I am a girl of 15 years of age, with green eyes and light brown hair, and stand 5'2". I would like to hear from boys and girls between the ages of 14 and 20, especially from the lucky ones who live on ranches, or from lonely service guys. I love movies, horseback riding, swimming, dancing and most sports. I promise to answer all letters and will gladly exchange snapshots. Come on, fellows and gals, please write.

PAT (MARTY) RAMER

148 Monroe Drive,
Little Rock, Ark.

Good Cook

Dear Editor:

I am a widow 64 years old, but would still like to have some pen pals. I am a cook in a sorority house here, and have long evenings for writing. Next June 1 expect to retire and move to my own little home on the coast. I like to read Ranch Romances and have for years.

ALICE PADDOCK

P.O. Box 316
Corvallis, Oregon

Farm Girl

Dear Editor:

Will you please find room in your column for a lonesome Texas gal? I am 18 years old, have blond hair, blue eyes, am 5'2" tall and weigh 135 lbs. I was raised on a farm and I like to cook, read and write letters. Please write real soon.

FRANCES GUEETEN

Rt. 13, Box 32
Houston, Texas

EDITOR'S NOTE: For 30 years Our Air Mail has been linking the readers of Ranch Romances. You may write directly to anyone whose letter is published, if you uphold the wholesome spirit of Ranch Romances.

Our Air Mail is intended for those who really want correspondents. Be sure to sign your own name. Address letters for publication to Our Air Mail, Ranch Romances, 10 East 40th Street, New York 16, N. Y.

Lost in Smog

Dear Editor:

I would like to correspond with people from 19 to 25 who live on ranches in New Mexico or Arizona. I am a native of Arizona, age 19, have dark brown hair and blue eyes, weigh 110 lbs. and am 5'2" tall. So, pretty please, write this lonely girl who's lost in "smog."

MELLIE FILLMORE

General Delivery
Los Angeles, California

Pro Rider

Dear Editor:

I'd just love to get a tiny space in Our Air Mail section to let everyone who likes to write know I will answer all letters I receive. I can write about lots of places cause I used to be a professional rider, and have traveled the 48 states, Canada and Mexico. I'm 5'7" tall, have blue eyes, reddish brown hair, and weigh 125 lbs. My favorite sports are hunting, fishing, camping and riding. I promise to answer every letter, and will exchange pictures.

KITTY REDWINE

C/O General Delivery
Station "B"
Cincinnati 22, Ohio

Airman

Dear Editor:

I am an Airman who has been to Korea, but am now stationed in Japan. I am almost 21 years old, have blond hair, stand 6 feet tall, weigh 160 lbs. and have blue eyes. I'd like to get letters from any "Miss" from the ages of 17 to 20. I promise to answer all letters that come my way, as the mail I get is pretty scarce.

A/2c LEE V. REED

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Editor
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A REDDING, Calif., motorist called an ambulance when he saw a truck go over a cliff. It was all in vain, though; the truckdriver, who had received very minor injuries, managed to get to town before the ambulance appeared at the scene of the accident, and had to return there to inform the ambulance driver his services were not needed.

ANOTHER CASE of waste motion happened in Quincy, Calif., when a siren summoned firemen to a blaze two blocks away —where they had been burning leaves before an over-anxious citizen turned in the fire alarm.

A PRACTICAL JOKER in Grand Island, Neb., proved that people don't read what they sign. He got 35 signatures on a petition asking, among other things, that the signers be "hanged by the neck until dead."

SAN FERNANDO, Calif., telephone company officials, worried about squirrels chewing up cables, were informed by an animal expert that the squirrels chew because they are "adolescent and neurotic." The company wondered if they would need a psychiatrist to combat the plague.

A YOUNG bank robber in San Francisco, Calif., decided not to waste time unlocking his own car when making a getaway. He stepped into another car, learned it was jacked up for repairs, got in a third car driving up and found it occupied by a cop.

A WISE WACO, Tex., wife helped her husband avoid a parking fine by sending the judge a pair of her husband's pants, which had a hole in the pocket. She explained that the car keys fell out of the pocket, so her husband couldn't move the car.

IN RICHMOND, Calif., a crook with a conscience robbed a store, then phoned the owner to tell him where most of the money was hidden. The crook also promised to repay the $61 which was all he kept from a $750 haul.

CAUGHT IN a San Francisco, Calif., hotel fire, one of the guests decided he had to be dressed, blaze or no blaze. So he donned shirt, tie, hat, etc., and didn't realize till he reached safety that he had forgotten his pants.

SHORTLY AFTER a Spokane, Ore., used-car dealer advertised one of the autos as "a steal at this price," the car was stolen.

SUING FOR divorce, a Detroit, Mich., wife charged that her husband not only locked up their food and made her pay for anything she ate, but also charged her the 3% Michigan sales tax.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

by movie editor ROBERT CUMMINGS

This famous top-hand of stage, screen and TV corrals the best of the Westerns

DESTRY

An old favorite rides again in Universal's rip-roaring story of the days when the Wild West was really wild

IT WASN'T only Western fans who loved *Destry Rides Again* when it came out 15 years ago. Practically everybody saw it—some people three or four times. So Universal, the studio which produced it then, decided it was high time Destry rode the reels again.

This time it's called simply *Destry,* and it stars Audie Murphy and Mari Blanchard. The story is changed a little, and the chief character is the original Destry's son, but the highlights of the old movie are used again in the new one.

The best possible director was chosen for the current *Destry*—George Marshall, director of the first one.

"I only filched what was best out of the old movie," he told me, "and one of the best things, of course, was that fight between Dietrich and Una Merkel."

If you remember *that* cat fight, you may find it hard to believe that the fight between Mari and Mary Wickes could be as violent. But it's a really hysterical tooth, claw and hair-pulling contest, which took two and a half days to film.

This female fracas showed up one chink in the armor of war hero Audie Murphy. The most-decorated soldier of the war was just plain scared to mix it up with the gals.

"I had to get between them and try to break it up," Audie said. "I got myself scratched half to death. That kind of fighting is for the birds."

Mari was inclined to agree with him. In fact, she went a step further and declared that just making movies was getting awfully hazardous.

"*Destry* was my all-time high for bad luck," she said. "I was battered and bruised from head to foot."

Her first injury occurred when she tripped over a metal fuse box and tore her instep. She had to have three stitches taken, and was told by the doctor to keep

off her feet. But the show had to go on, and Marie had to do all her dance routines before the foot had mended.

She expected to get a few bumps and scratches in her fight with Mary, but she wasn't prepared for the kick in the nose that Mary inadvertently gave her.

Back to the hospital she went for X-rays, where she was assured that her profile was only temporarily damaged.

Lori Nelson, who plays Destry's sweetheart, had no complaints about her part. "When I saw those two gals go at each other I was glad I had nothing to do but sit around and look demure."

Also in the cast is that fine character actor, Thomas Mitchell, who plays the same sort of role which won him an Academy Award in *Stagecoach*.

"This whisky-soaked type is timeless," said Tom. "And I've played the guy so many times I've gotten fond of him. You know the type. The day he grew up he took one good look at the world and said, 'Nuts, I don't want to see it sober.' And he headed for the nearest bar."

Director Marshall celebrated his 40th year and his 400th film at a party given by the studio during the making of Destry. The whole cast cheered him when he cut a huge cake which said, "400-40" in icing.

And there were plenty of Marshall's old friends at the party, veteran players like Franklin Farnum, Stan Blystone, Rex Lease, Mabel Forrest. Every one of them had a bit part in the show. Marshall always sees to it that veteran actors get jobs in his pictures.

But there were plenty of newcomers, too, on both sides of the camera. Marshall's son was at his elbow as dialogue director. Franklin Farnum's daughter, Geraldine, danced in the chorus. Alan Hale, Jr., and Harold Lockwood, Jr., sons of two famous actors, now dead, played supporting parts.

When the cake was cut, Marshall looked around at all his friends, old and new. His eyes were a little misty as he said, "People would never believe that making movies is such a friendly family affair."

Lee Aaker watches Lori Nelson tell Audie Murphy a tall story

DANA ANDREWS
An Angel Helped

THE ONLY person I know who had his own personal angel is Dana Andrews. This was a flesh-and-blood angel, a man who was a complete stranger to Dana, but who backed him to the extent of $10,000 before Dana got his first job in the movies. His name is Dana's secret to this day.

It's a story that proves truth is stranger than fiction. Back in the 1930's Dana chucked his job in the accounting department of a Texas oil firm and came to Hollywood, hoping to become a singer. He was spending $20 a month for singing lessons out of his meager earnings as a gas station attendant. This was the situation for five long years.

And then one day a shiny limousine pulled into the station. After a few moment's chat with Dana, the stranger driving the car said, "You ought to be an actor. I'll pay for dramatic lessons."

Dana accepted the offer, forgot about singing from that day forward, and began to work full-time at the Pasadena Playhouse. His backer kept him clothed, housed and fed while he learned his new profession. He played bit parts at first, and finally worked his way up to a starring part. Then, at last, Hollywood noticed him.

Producer Sam Goldwyn tested him, put him under contract, but still kept him studying for another year. He made his first movie, *The Westerner,* almost exactly ten years after he first arrived in Hollywood.

In that first picture he went to Tucson for location scenes, and when I saw him recently he'd again been to Tucson—fifteen years later—for location scenes in his new picture *Strange Lady in Town,* in which he stars with Greer Garson.

Dana was born on New Year's Day in a small town in Mississippi which was then called Dont but has since been changed to Collins. Dana doesn't approve of the change.

"I think the old name was inspiring," he told me. "I used to repeat it over and over when I was discouraged."

Dana was the third son in the big family (seven boys and two girls) of a Baptist minister. He likes big families and has a fairly sizable one by today's standards. His eldest son, David, is now 21, and was born to Dana's first wife who died in 1935.

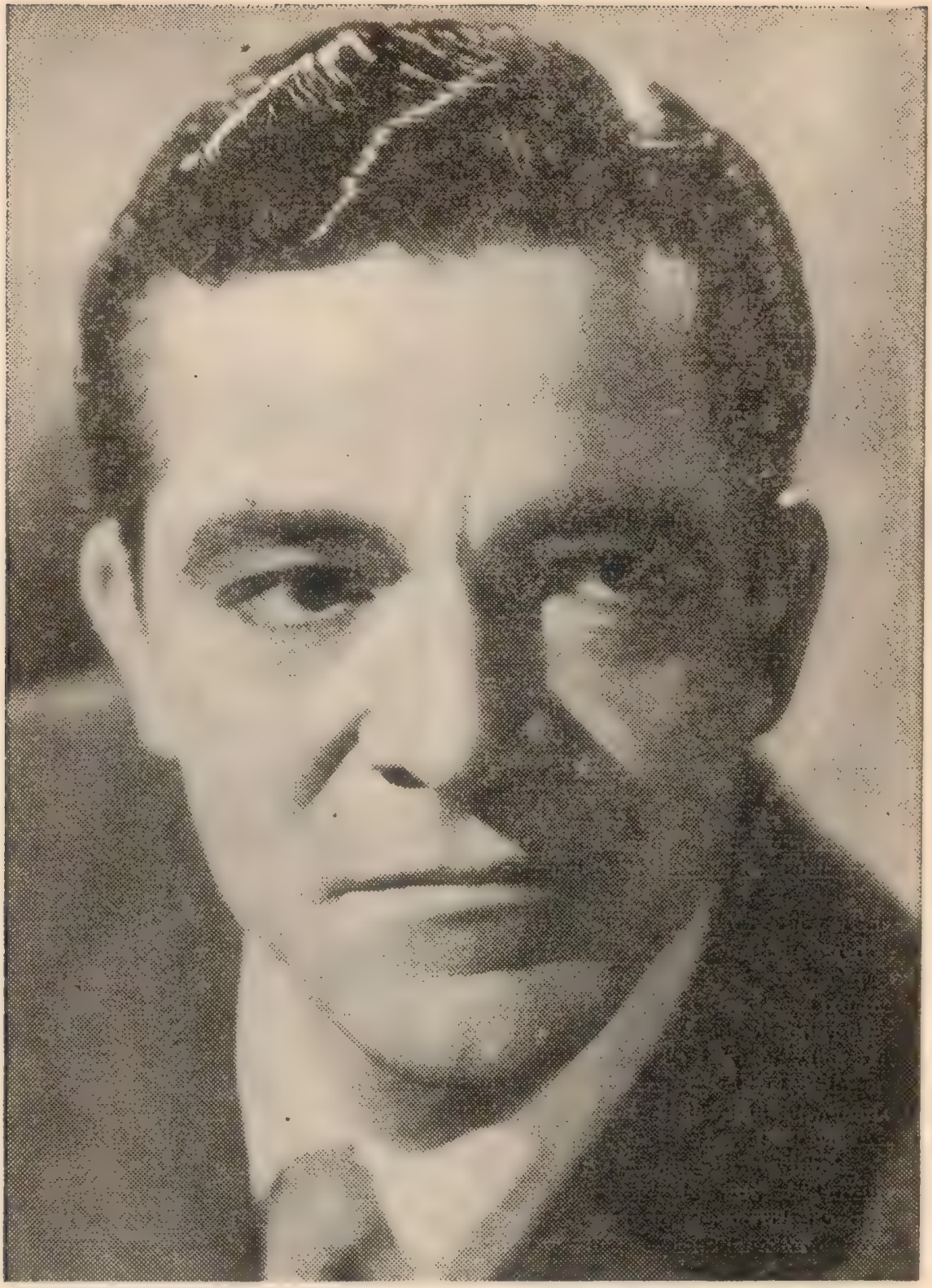
By his second marriage, in 1939, he has three more children—Katherine, Stephen and Susan. David, by the way, seems destined for the musical career that his father abandoned, and already he's had some success as a pianist and composer.

You'd never think, seeing Dana and his wife Mary together, that they've been married fifteen years. She says she's never regretted giving up her career as an actress, because Dana treats her like a leading lady. They even hold hands in the movies!

They hate to be separated, and so even on Dana's most distant and rugged locations Mary goes along. She's been all over the U.S. with him, and also to London, the Virgin Islands and Malaya. But they love to get home to their big house full of youngsters, and they love to sail down the California coast on their own small yacht.

They share the hobby of photography, both still and movie, and argue good-naturedly with each other about which is the most talented photographer.

Theirs, in fact, is one of those Hollywood marriages you never read about—just because it's so happy.



20th Century-Fox

The truth of Dana's success story is stranger than fiction

Texan, Sell

The gauntness of Shelly's face revealed her hunger

Your Saddle

by WALKER A. TOMPKINS

THERE ARE SOME things a son of the Lone Star won't do

. . . even a broke and stranded cowpoke like Steve Mayo

THE west-bound cattle train was already rolling out of the Abilene yards when Steve Mayo tossed his sacked saddle and warbags through the open door of a cattle car and scrambled aboard. It had been a risky business, working by starlight and with his spike-heeled cowboots making uncertain footing on the loose clinkers of the road bed apron. A heck of a way to leave town!

But he had had little choice, broke and stranded as he was.

The train, fifty empties and a caboose consigned to Dodge City, had got highballing on the main line at midnight. Mayo had not realized he had company until daybreak brightened the flat Kansas prairies beyond Hutchinson.

He was sharing the car with three bearded, roughly-dressed men, obviously hoboes, who were bedded down in the straw at the far end of the car. When they roused and began passing around a bottle of red-eye, they ignored the stranger at the other end. It was just as well. Steve Mayo might be down on his luck, reduced to stealing a ride west on the Santa Fe, but he wasn't reduced to rubbing shoulders with bindle stiffs yet.

The tramps realized he was not one of their roving breed. Mayo was obviously a cowhand. His flat-crowned stetson was pushed back from a shock of sorrel hair; Texas stars were stitched in red kangaroo leather on his Justins. His chaps bore the scuffs of hard usage in the Nueces brasada country. He wore no shell belt or gun, but there was a shiny spot on the leather encasing his right thigh where a Colt holster had been tied down.

Mayo's hickory shirt was work-faded, but newly laundered. A Durham sack's paper disc dangled from one pocket. The hoboes might have wondered during the monotonous day's travel, why this stranger didn't smoke, not knowing that Mayo's tobacco sack was as empty as the money belt buckled around his midriff next to the skin.

The sacked saddle and the warbag, bearing the Lazy H brand of a big south-Texas cattle outfit, told its own story to the three railroad bums. This husky man, in his middle twenties probably, was a cowhand separated from his horse for some reason.

Once, during a tank stop somewhere along the Arkansas River west of Hutchinson, Mayo overheard the hoboes discussing him.

"Could be on the dodge. See the bowed legs? His kind ride horseback unless they're in a big hurry."

MAYO piled up a heap of bedding straw against the planked bulkhead at the end of the car and made himself comfortable. Let 'em make their guesses. He wasn't riding deadhead on the Santa Fe through choice. They had the look of bounty hunters about them, the way they shot furtive glances at him from the corners of their red-rimmed, porcine eyes. They were debating, maybe, whether to report him to a brakeman at the next siding, for a cut of whatever reward he might be toting on his scalp.

At high noon the hoboes exhumed a paper bag out of the hay and shared sandwiches which they had probably begged from some housewife in Abilene. The sight of food made Mayo's mouth water, put a tightening sensation in his belly.

Let's see, how long had it been since he'd had a square meal? Two days ago, at that free lunch counter in an Abilene saloon where his Lazy H trail boss had been supposed to meet him and pay him the six weeks' wages due for helping shove a beef herd up the Chisholm Trail from Texas.

He'd been paid off, all right. But someone—maybe a bartender, maybe one of the housemen who patrolled the barroom keeping check on boisterous customers—had seen the cash change hands.

Anyway, somewhere along the line, knock-out drops must have been planted in his food or the beer he'd ordered. His memory would be forever fuzzy about what had happened.

He had come to in an alley behind the livery barn where he must have gone after leaving the saloon. His pockets had been empty and he'd had a headache that would have floored a bull.

"No use even reporting it to the marshal, kid," a sympathetic hostler had told him. "Happens every day during trail season, only some of 'em don't come out as lucky as you did. Some of 'em the undertaker picks up after they've been rolled, with knife cuts in their gizzards."

The cowboy's outfit had pulled out, headed back to Texas. But Steve Mayo had had a belly full of Texas. The sight of a Santa Fe train heading westward out of Abilene had given him the idea to drift yonderward.

So Steve Mayo, without a pair of nickels to rattle in his levis pocket, had left his crowbait Lazy H peg pony behind to settle a week's feed bill, toted his sadle and warbag down to the Santa Fe freight yards,

and hopped the first westbound cattle train that came along.

Texas had brought him nothing but bad luck. He didn't aim to go back to the Rio Grande country, ever. Trouble always came his way down in the Lone Star country. Maybe he'd see what it was like out in Colorado or Arizona or somewhere.

The cow train had the high iron to itself during the long afternoon. Mayo slept in snatches.

It was coming on to sundown when he roused again. Through the slatted sides of the stock car he caught a glimpse of a frontier cavalry post the car was wheeling past. A company of bluecoats were drawn up in formation on matched bays to stand retreat ceremony.

"Fort Dodge." The whisky-thickened voice startled Mayo.

He looked around. One of the hoboes, a pot-bellied man with a livid knife-scar along one hairy cheek, had left his companions to come forward and hunker down a short distance in front of the cowpuncher.

Mayo nodded. He resented this bleary-eyed derelict grinning at him as if he were a green kid playing hookey. But why should he feel any better than this tramp? His own jaws were dark with a three-day stubble. He felt dirty; his shirt was plastered adhesively to his back with sweat.

"Dodge City coming up," the hobo went on. "You're new to this sort of thing, aren't you, buckaroo?"

Mayo nodded. The tramp seemed friendly enough.

"Prob'ly wondered why no brakie has thrown us off this rattler today."

STEVE MAYO mopped his face with the dusty red bandanna knotted around his throat for a neckpiece.

"Hadn't given it any thought, amigo."

The bum picked up a straw and stuck it between broken snags of teeth.

"Better, then. Those Santy Fe brakies know what they're doing. At that last tank stop, feller who checked the wheels for hot boxes was taking a hobo count. Knows damn well he's got four customers in this car, and don't think he doesn't!"

"Customers?" Steve Mayo echoed.

On the horizon he could see the blur which would be Dodge City, hell-raising cowboy town at the end of the Texas Trail. The funnel-stacked engine up ahead was already whistling to signal its approach.

"Railroaders got a deal with the marshal in Dodge," the tramp said. "Collect five bucks for every tramp they drag off a train. Turn him over to the local law. No trial, no nothing. You spend the next ninety days chopping wood to keep the jailhouse stove warm over these Kansas winters."

Up ahead, the engineer was whistling for brakes. These empty cattle cars were consigned to the shipping pens at Dodge City; this was as far west as this train would take Mayo.

"Why you telling me this, amigo?" Mayo asked in a more friendly tone.

The hobo stood up, clinging to a wall slat for support.

"Figured a greenhorn ought to know. Train slows down coming into the yards at Dodge City. That's your last chance to hop off. Let a brakie catch you crawling off, you'll wind up on a wood-chopping detail for three months."

The train was slowing down to a snail's pace, brake shoes squalling on flatted wheels, couplers and draw bars making their metallic grumble down the length of the consist.

"Thanks for the advice, amigo."

The hobo turned his back on Mayo and trundled the north door open. The other two tramps, toting bedrolls, took their place at the opening, biding their time to jump with the wisdom of long experience at this sort of thing.

Mayo watched, fascinated. He estimated the cow train was rolling faster than a horse could gallop when the first tramp made his jump, rolling over and over through a thicket of roadbed weeds. The other two followed in quick succession, and Mayo was alone.

He got to his feet, stretching bone-tired muscles, a rangy six-footer, feeling off-balance on the swaying floor of the car as it rattled over the unballasted roadbed.

Break my neck trying to jump in these

boots, he decided. Besides, it was too late. They were abreast a long line of corral fences now, where Dodge City pens were crowded with longhorns up from Texas. This was the height of the beef-shipping season.

Try to jump now, Mayo knew, and he'd slam against one of those stockades with force enough to break every bone in his body. Nothing to do but take his chances of having a tough Santa Fe brakie spot him leaving the car.

The train was rumbling over switch frogs now, shunting onto the stockyard siding. The bite of brakes made the car jerk and pitch. It was like being on the hurricane deck of a bronc, forcing Steve Mayo to hang onto the car door to keep from falling.

Then, with clanging bell and much hissing of steam from the woodburner up ahead, the Abilene freight grated to a halt.

Mayo poked his head out the car door. Far to the rear he saw a conductor descending the caboose steps, followed by two blue-jumpered brakemen.

Close at hand, a voice startled Mayo. "These'll be our cars I reckon, Shelly."

Mayo swung his glance around. A tall, red-headed rancher in Stetson and bat-wing chaps stood alongside the tracks. At his elbow was a girl in her early twenties, wearing a man's levis, taffy-brown cavalry boots, and an apricot-colored silk blouse

which accentuated the ripe curves of her bosom.

FOR an instant the girl's eyes, the color of Texas blue-bonnets, met Steve Mayo's. Then she said to the man at her side, "I hope so. Some outfits have to keep their herds out on bedground for a month, waiting for cars."

Mayo ducked back into the car and reappeared at the door with his saddle and warbag. He dropped them to the apron, throwing them down-track a little so the warbag wouldn't bounce over in the direction of the girl, standing so close at hand.

Then he swung down to a sitting position on the splintered floor of the car and slid to the ground.

He was shouldering his gear, eyes ranging along the unbroken blocks of crowded shipping pens for an alley where he could duck out of sight, when a harsh voice lashed out at him, seemingly from nowhere:

"Just stand hitched, bum. Stay where you are."

The girl called Shelly glanced up over Mayo's head. Mayo's eyes followed her glance and he saw a thick-necked Santa Fe brakeman hurrying along the catwalk on the roof of the car, a brake stick in one hand.

With incredible speed the brakeman descended the iron ladder at the far end of the car and stalked toward Mayo.

The Texan felt a quick stab of tension go through him. Be damned if he wanted to be sold for a five-dollar fee to the Dodge City marshal, and wind up cutting kindling at the jailhouse woodpile! Those hoboes had known what they were doing, quitting this train well outside of town.

Mayo swung on his heels. The rancher and the girl were staring at him curiously. Up the tracks, the train conductor and two brakemen were coming down the narrow corridor between the cars and the shipping pens. That cut off flight in that direction, if he wanted to run. He didn't. He was too tired and hungry and dead-beat for sleep to run away from this glowering brakeman. Besides, letting a Santa Fe man buffalo him ran against the grain.

He lowered his saddle and possibles bag to the ground and turned to meet the brakeman's hostile stare. The man was holding out a leathery palm, rubbing thumb and forefinger together.

"Come on, hobo. Give."

Mayo's jaw hardened. "How's that again?"

The railroader chuckled deep in his throat. "You hopped this rattler at Abilene last night. You think the A.T. and S.F. is going to haul you better'n two hundred mile for free? Your jaunt will cost you ten bucks, friend."

Mayo shook his head. "I haven't got ten cents, let alone ten bucks."

The brakeman rubbed his hickory stick against a blue-denim pants leg.

"Fine. Then you and me are taking a pasear to the marshal's office over on Front Street, my bucko."

The railroader reached with his left hand to seize Mayo's arm. The Texan wrenched himself free of the man's grasp.

"Lay off, mister," he bit out. "You're not taking me any place. Stand aside."

In this moment Steve Mayo was regretting that his gun and belt were rolled up in an army blanket inside his sack. This leering giant wouldn't be talking so fast and loose to an armed man.

"You're coming peaceable, buckaroo," the brakeman panted thickly, "or I'll drag you over to the calaboose by your spurs. Ten bucks or ninety days in the pokey. Make up your mind. I got other cars to check."

Mayo backed away a step. Behind him he could hear the boots of the other railroaders crunching on cinders. He felt trapped.

"I tell you, I've go no money."

Tucking his brake stick under one armpit, the brakeman spat on his palms. He was getting a grip on the hickory when the rancher standing a few feet to Mayo's right said in an amused drawl with the accents of Texas in it. "Better make a deal with this brakeman, stranger. Dodge City's rough on saddle bums."

MAYO glanced around, retreating another step to get out of the range of the brakeman's club.

"I'm not a bum, hombre." He didn't know why he said that. Maybe it was the girl, watching him tensely with those limpid blue eyes. It galled a man to be dressed down in front of a girl as pretty as she was. "I'm a Texan, same as yourself."

The ranchman gestured at the gunnysack at Mayo's feet.

"Sight unseen, I'll buy the kak you're packing, kid. That's the way out of this tight, Texan—sell your saddle!"

Steve Mayo sucked in a deep breath. "I may be down and out," he ground out, "but not that low. When a Texan sells his saddle he's scraping bottom."

At the girl's instinctive cry of warning Steve Mayo rolled out from under the down-clubbing arc of the Santa Fe man's hickory bludgeon. He felt the brake stick graze his left shoulder and slide off to rattle against the boxcar at his side. Then, moving with the speed of a striking snake while the burly railroader was off-balance at the end of his swing, Steve Mayo drove a smashing right uppercut to the brakeman's jaw.

He saw the man's eyes rock back in their sockets, his head snap sideways from the force of that blow. The punch had carried

every ounce of strength Steve Mayo could muster from his hundred-and-eighty-pound bulk. He had swung from the boot straps, gambling everything on one lucky punch.

And luck, for the first time in a long while, was with him. The brake stick slid from the railroader's lax fingers. The man's knees buckled and he swayed back, vision glazing, mouth hanging slack-lipped and open.

Given time to recover, this brakeman could be dangerous, murderous. Steve Mayo did not intend to give him a second chance, knowing he was outweighed and outreached, and famished in the bargain. He didn't have what it would take to weather a barroom brawl with this railroader. Get this over now, quick, he thought.

Bracing himself, Mayo let the Santa Fe man have a looping haymaker straight to the nose. Blood spattered. The brakeman's arms windmilled frantically as the punch drove him back on his heels. Then he lost his footing and went down, his hat flying off to let his cropped head slam hard against a protruding journal-box.

Behind him, Mayo heard the conductor yell, "Get him, men! O'Flannagan's down."

The brakeman was knocked out, sprawled as cold as a fish beside the rail, one arm lying limp along the stubby ends of the crossties.

Boots were slogging up the right-of-way behind him as the brakeman's coworkers raced in for the kill. Mayo stooped to snatch up his sacked saddle, ready to run for it now.

Vaguely, he heard the girl's sharp scream beside him. "No, Curt, no! It's not your affair."

Then the blow landed, a hammer blow to his skull, only partially padded by his beaver Stetson. Falling, Steve Mayo had the briefest glimpse of the Texas cattleman towering over him, a long-barreled sixgun poised for a second blow.

He heard the girl's scream of protest as if from a vast distance. Then the Texan's whipping Colt barrel caught him solidly across the cheekbone.

Fireworks exploded in Mayo's brain. Blackness was closing out the sunset glow. His teeth and tongue were gouging into dirt and cinders and rubble. And then he knew no more. A sickening oblivion claimed him.

STEVE MAYO pulled out of that insensate, inpenetrable blackness into another kind of blackness, velvet-thick, but with a quality of reality about it that told him he was no longer unconscious.

With reality came pain—throbbing, rhythmic pain in his head that had something to do with the slug of his heart.

Gradually he became aware that he was lying flat. His cheek felt sticky from dried blood. Groping a shaky hand up to feel the welt on his cheekbone, he encountered an ugly, puffed-up swelling.

He remembered then. That double-crossing Texan, clubbing him from behind when he'd had his battle won, had whipped the brakie in fair fight. Was he still lying sprawled out on the Santa Fe right-of-way?

But no. The sound he had at first mistaken for the bawling of penned cattle was something else, and close at hand. It was sleeping men, snoring raucously.

The air here was fetid. There was no scent of sage from the prairies, no dank smell of the Arkansas bottoms, the odor of woodsmoke and lubricating oil and fresh steam that he associated with the railroad. And the stockyard smell was missing, too.

He rolled over, aware that some kind of springs were giving under his weight, and the next moment he was toppling over the brink of a precipice. He grunted, falling. It was a short fall, not more than three feet. But for a long while he lay panting, motionless, on a floor of rammed earth or adobe brick.

After a time he pulled himself to his feet, nausea stabbing him, his head reeling. He began walking, came up short against a wall of iron latticework. He clawed against it, clutching at it for support. Then he heard a straw tick mattress creaking to a man's shifting weight and a gravelly voice that was somehow familiar came through the felty darkness.

"Easy, cowboy. No use fighting this. You're cooped."

Fighting off dizzy sensations, Mayo tried to locate that disembodied voice. It seemed to come from beyond this iron cage that boxed him in.

"Where am I, anyhow?"

"Dodge City juzgado, kid. It's hours to daylight, and you'll need all the rest you can get for what you got ahead of you tomorrow. Lie down and sleep."

Mayo groped his way back to what he now recognized as a jail bunk. He sat down, holding his splitting temples between his hands.

"I've heard your voice before," he said finally, not caring.

The occupant of the next cell chuckled. "I'm the guy who told you to hop off the train yesterday. Told you what would happen if you were seen climbing out in Dodge."

Mayo thought that over. Then he saw a humorous touch to this incongrous business. How come the bindle stiff was here, too?

"Should have taken your advice, feller. Wouldn't be in the lock-up if I had."

The hobo rolled over on his bunk and grunted profanely.

"I twisted an ankle. Had to crawl in to find a medico. Prowling marshal picked me up first. Said in a week I'd be able to wear an Oregon boot and take my turn at the bucksaw."

Snores indicated then that the hobo was feigning sleep. Steve Mayo stretched out on the straw tick, wondering if it were verminous. The jail smelled of cuspidors and unwashed bodies and the stored-up heat of a stifling Kansas summer day.

He thought bitterly. I had that brakeman whipped. If that Texican hadn't stepped in and clubbed me, I'd have got away."

The girl had saved him a cracked skull, warning him about the brakeman's club. And his last coherent memory was of Shelly —that was her name, a pretty name for a beautiful girl—telling the man with her that it was none of his business what happened to this saddle bum.

He thought of her, a girl in an apricot-colored blouse with the bluest eyes he had ever seen, and ripe, ruby-red lips in a sun-tanned face. She wore levis and probably knew how to ride and rope and shoot. Funny the things a man's brain stored up for future use. At the time he hadn't given her much attention, trapped as he'd been. He tried to recall the color of her hair, remembered it was ripe golden brown, like corn tassles in the shock. She was the big Texican's wife, most likely.

She had pitied him, knowing she would never see him, an unshaven railroad bum, again. It would be nice to thank her some time, but she was up the trail from Texas, most likely. And he would never have the dust of Texas on his boot soles again. He hated Texas. He wouldn't have been in this scrape, would he, if it hadn't been for a fellow Texan?

HE DOZED off then, and when he woke gray daylight was showing through a barred window over his two-by-four cell and a jailer's keys were jangling in his cell lock.

Mayo rolled over and sat up. A swarthy-faced Mexican kid set a tray of grub on a box by his bunk, then backed out and locked the iron door behind him.

The pot-bellied hobo with the knife scar disfiguring his face was wolfing his breakfast in the next cell. Other prisoners were doing the same, up and down the ill-ventilated bullpen. The dawn light was helped out some, not much, by the glimmer of a dirty-chimneyed lantern hanging from a ceiling beam.

"Ten minutes to eat, señor," the Mexican advised Steve Mayo.

Mayo picked up a tin cup filled with brackish coffee and downed it at a gulp. He had to be half starved to swallow the rubbery fried egg, the charred strips of sowbelly, and the bowl of cold oatmeal mush which Dodge City supplied its civic guests.

When he had finished, with five of the allotted minutes to spare, he saw the fat hobo peering at him through the lattice-work.

"Got a smoke on you, cowboy?"

Mayo grinned and tossed his empty Durham sack across the cell. It fluttered to the

dirty brick floor like a piece of paper. "Used the last crumb three days ago in Abilene," he said.

The hobo took a turn around his cell, favoring his sore ankle.

"How do I go about getting out of here?" Mayo demanded.

Except for once down in Encinal, when he was seventeen and had got tangled up in a free-for-all fight at a dance hall, he had never been behind bars before.

The hobo grinned. "You don't, kid. Not for four-to-six months."

Mayo looked up sharply. "Hold on. You told me Santa Fe bums drew ninety days on the woodpile."

"Ordinary bums like me, maybe. Not you. You get the full treatment, maybe a year, even."

A chill rippled down Mayo's backbone. He got the impression that this hobo wasn't joshing him.

The hobo shrugged. "You're in for assault and battery, cowboy. That brakeman you punched got a brain concussion, I hear. Lucky he pulled out of it. If he'd died you'd have drawn a hangrope."

Further talk was interrupted by the bullpen door swinging open. A heavy-set man with a black mustache and a tin star pinned to his rusty vest stalked into the cell block. The badge had the words "City Marshal" etched on it.

Halting in front of Mayo's cell, the Dodge City lawman unlocked it and gestured for his prisoner to come out.

Mutely, Steve Mayo followed the marshal into an outer office. The night constable, just going off duty here at sunrise, was hanging his gunbelts in a cabinet.

The marshal grunted something to his night man, who shuffled out. Then he seated himself at a littered rolltop desk and fished out paper and ink bottle.

"Paper work," the marshal said sourly. "Name and age?"

Mayo hesitated, wondering if he ought to give an assumed name. There didn't seem any point to that. No use acting like a criminal.

"Stephen Mayo, he said. "Twenty-seven."

"Occupation?"

"I've been working the past couple of years for the Lazy H outfit down Encinal way. Came north with a herd to Abilene."

"Born where?"

"Realitos. Jerkwater town in Duval County, Texas."

The marshal's pen scratched noisily.

"Got any money on you for me to lock up in the safe?"

Mayo shook his head. "Stone broke." He paused, remembering something. "Had my saddle and possibles with me when I hit Dodge yesterday."

The marshal gestured toward a closet door. "Holding your gear. With good behavior, and meeting your cordwood quota every day, you'll get your stuff back. . . . let's see. . . . this is July tenth. You can figure on getting out around Thanksgiving. Give me a rough time and you'll draw a full year."

ANGER stirred Mayo, making him forget the agony of his bruised skull.

"Hold on, Marshal. Don't I get to tell my story to a judge?"

The marshal poked his papers into a pigeonhole and swung his swivel chair around to face Mayo.

"You've already been tried, found guilty, and sentenced, for roughing up a Santa Fe employee in the performance of his duty. Save your energy for the bucksaw, Mayo. Don't waste it giving me a windy about being as innocent as a new-born babe. They all say that when I lock 'em up."

A sign on a fly-speckled window alongside the desk identified Dodge City's marshal as one Gabe Hardman. Judging from the predatory cut of the lawman's mouth, Steve Mayo figured he would probably live up to his last name.

From behind his desk Marshal Hardman dragged out a rusty iron contraption, which he proceeded to padlock around Mayo's left ankle, over the boot. Fifty pounds of metal on a man's hoof would keep him from straying far.

"This way," the marshal ordered, opening a side door which gave Mayo a view of a littered side yard surrounded by a high

barbed wire fence. A mountain of sawlogs was ricked along one wall of the adobe jail.

Dragging the Oregon boot down the steps, Mayo saw a half-dozen saw horses lined up in a row across the yard, each one surrounded by mounds of chips and sawdust. Further on, ricked up against the side of a sheet-iron warehouse, were cords upon cords of stove wood, sixteen-inch size.

"Take your pick of weapons, Mayo." The marshal chuckled, indicating a collection of rusty saws and axes leaning against the jail wall. "Remember what I said. You got a rick of stovewood per day to turn out, else you don't eat."

Mayo groaned. Four months of this torture stretching ahead, and not a thing he could do to prevent it! Loafing on the job would be useless. The marshal would have ways and means of discouraging uncooperative prisoners, he sensed.

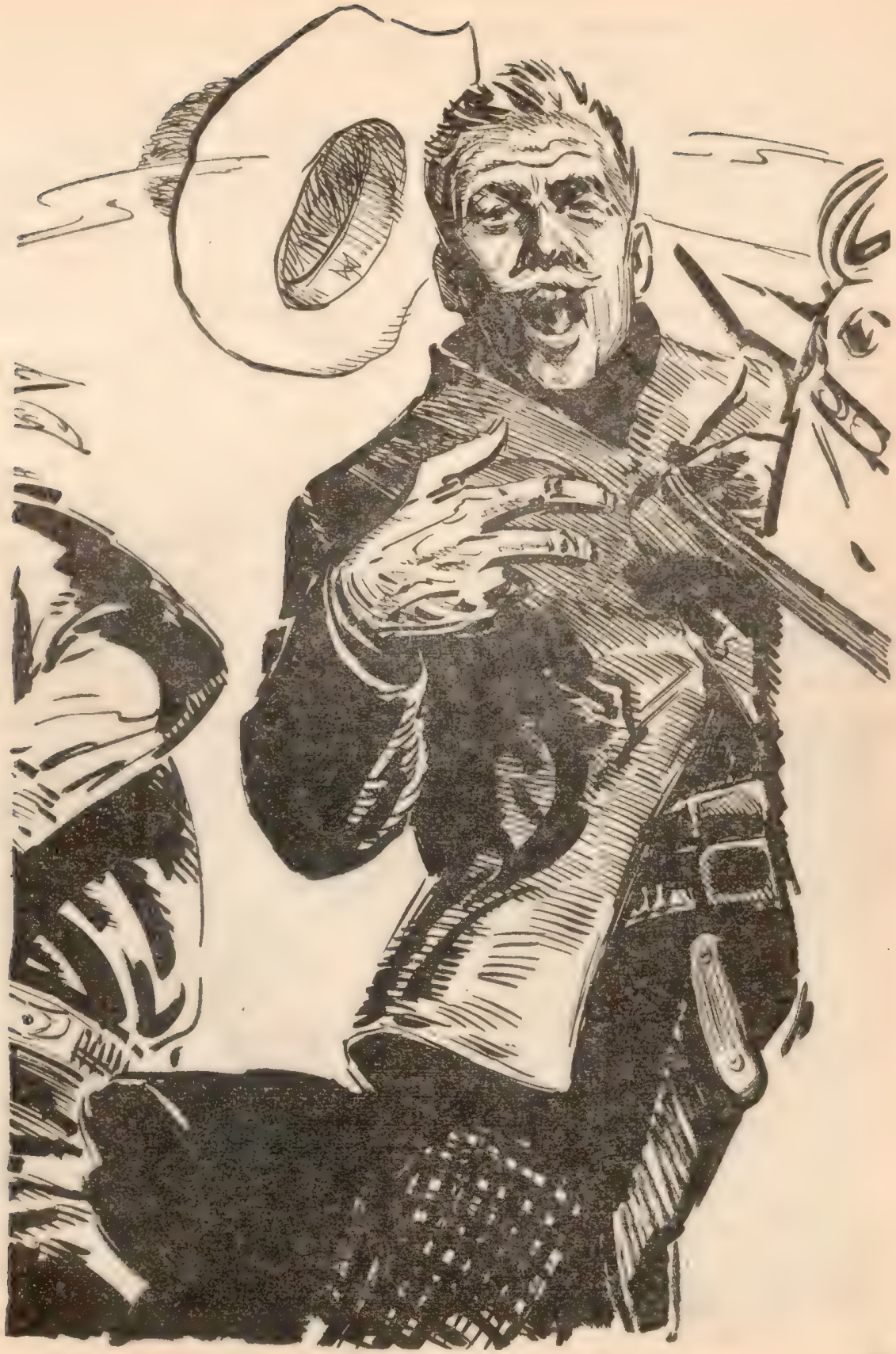
"Isn't there some way a man can work off his time besides chopping wood?" Mayo asked wearily. "Swamping out stables, say?"

The marshal headed back to his office. Pausing on the threshold, he called back sneeringly, "Consider yourself lucky that brakie had a hard head, kid. If he'd died—"

Hardman gestured beyond the wire fence to where a gallows frame stood, three ropes dangling over open traps on the elevated platform. Justice was rough and elemental in Dodge.

Mayo picked the least dull of the saws and dragged a locust log off the main pile over to a sawbuck. Four other woebegone prisoners joined him. Two of them, Mayo soon learned, had been sawing wood here since early June.

The heavy concussion of a carbine breached the stillness



"Only two ways to get out of here ahead of your time, kid," one prisoner said. "One is cutting your throat. And the other one won't be tunneling under the wall some dark night. That's been tried. Rock slab two feet under that adobe floor."

Mayo tried to make his left ankle comfortable inside the Oregon boot. The joint would be raw and bleeding from the tight fit by noon, he knew.

"How do you do it, then?" he asked dully. "Get out, I mean."

"Post bail. That's probably why the marshal asked you if you had any cash."

"How much bail?"

"In my case, fifty dollars. You, knocking out a Santy Fee brakie, you'd come high—a hundred dollars, maybe more."

A hundred dollars! It might as well be a million. If he still had his Lazy H wages he could do it. But if it hadn't been for those knockout drops in Abilene, he'd be Texas-bound with his outfit now.

He thought, maybe this was what was written in the book for me. Maybe this was what it took to get me out of Texas.

THE long hours dragged on endlessly. Freckled, bare-footed kids lined the barbed wire fence, jibing the woodchoppers with childish cruelty. The five men worked stolidly, like automatons, knowing if that if each didn't have a rick of stovewood cut and chopped by nightfall they wouldn't eat tonight.

At ten o'clock the marshal sent the Mexican kid out with a water jug and a tin cup.

When it came Mayo's turn the Mexican said, "Señor Marshal wants to see you een the office, amigo."

Mayo blinked, knowing a cold fear. Why should Hardman be sending for him, on his first day? This sounded like trouble.

Tossing his saw to one side, Mayo started for the jail office, appalled at the thought of what new form of torture the marshal might have in store for him. He thought, what if that brakeman died of a fractured skull? It was my punch that made him hit that journal box. They could easily enough call that murder.

Reaching the steps, he had to seize the Oregon boot by the padlock in orded to lift his leg up into the office. Marshal Hardman was at his desk, riffling through a sheaf of greenbacked currency.

Seated in a Douglas chair alongside the lawman's desk, a tall, ruddy-faced man with a silvery mustache and goatee and friendly gray-green eyes was regarding Mayo from beneath frosty brows.

"This is your man, Mr. Slingerland," Hardman grunted, after a brief glance at the Texan in the doorway.

Slingerland stood up. He was around fifty, dressed entirely in black—black stetson, black coat, black pants tucked into costly black Hussar-type boots. His hands were white and long-fingered, like a gambler's. Mayo had never seen him before. He wondered if this man was a lawyer or a judge, coming to tell him that the brakeman had died and that he was under a death sentence.

"Steve Mayo?" the stranger asked, offering the Texan his hand. "I'm John Slingerland."

Mayo blinked stupidly. The marshal unlocked a wall safe and stuffed the greenbacks into a little tin box.

"Slingerland here has bailed you out, Mayo," the marshal said tonelessly. "The price in your case came high, two hundred dollars. But yours was a serious charge—assault and battery. I'm liable to hear from Santa Fe's lawyers, bellyaching for letting you off."

Mayo could only stare, saying nothing. Who was this John Slingerland? Why was it worth two hundred dollars to this stranger to bail a man out?

But it was true. Gabe Hardman was squatting at the Texas cowboy's feet, unlocking the Oregon boot. John Slingerland was grinning. Unless this was some sort of cruel joke, a sadist's trick, Steve Mayo was a free man.

"You understand, Mr. Mayo," Slingerland was saying, "this so-called 'bail' has no strings attached. You won't be arraigned for a trial of any kind in future. You're in the clear so far as Dodge City law is concerned."

Mayo frowned, puzzled. "Whatever strings are attached to this," he said stiffly, "are attached to your pocketbook, I reckon."

Slingerland shrugged. "Call it philanthropy on my part. Did you have any property impounded upon your arrest and confinement, young man?"

"My saddle," Mayo said, "and warbag. All I've got in the world. Only way I can repay you, Mr. Slingerland, is to work it off at the only trade I know, cowpunching."

Slingerland smiled enigmatically. "Time enough to discuss that later. In the meantime, Mr. Mayo, I'll have to ask you to remain here in Marshal Hardman's bastile until dark tonight."

Mayo's heart sank. He had known this was too good to be true.

SLINGERLAND, seeing the crestfallen look on Mayo's face, said gently, "Not on the woodpile, son. The thing is, I can't very well be seen leaving here with you. I have reasons for wanting your release kept secret—important reasons."

The black-garbed man stepped to the door. He took an expensive cigar from his vest pocket, bit off the end, and fired his smoke. Then, with a farewell salute, he said. "As soon as it gets dark, bring your gear over to the Buffalo Hotel on Front Street. My room is Number Six, upstairs. I'll be expecting you."

With that Slingerland was gone. Mayo turned to the marshal, who was unlocking the bullpen door.

The lawman grunted, "You can use your old cell, kid. Nothing to do but take it easy all day. Slingerland's bail bought you out of the wood-chopping detail."

Mayo shuffled dazedly into the cell block. He expected the marshal to lock him in, but Hardman did not follow him down the corridor.

"Night constable comes on duty at eight," he called after Mayo. "He'll give you your belongings."

Mayo said bleakly. "What is this? I don't get it."

Hardman grunted. "You're free to walk out right now, Mayo. But you heard what Slingerland said. He doesn't want anyone to know he bailed you out."

"But why?" Mayo persisted. "Who is this Slingerland?"

"Since he didn't see fit to tell you," the marshal said, "it's not my business to. You can ask him over at the hotel tonight, unless you skin out without seeing Slingerland. That's your business."

"I'll see him," Mayo said to the closing door. "I owe him that much, I reckon."

Steve Mayo was close to exhaustion by the time darkness came to Dodge City. The interior of the jail was a furnace and the grub served at the noon meal had made him ill. He saw the marshal only once more, at six o'clock when the wood-choppers filed in, had their Oregon boots removed, and were locked in their cells.

When the night man came on duty at eight, the Texan made his way to the marshal's office and asked for his gear. The constable made no answer, asked no questions. He unlocked a closet, hauled out the sacked saddle and the warbag, and had Mayo sign a receipt for them.

A few minutes later Steve was heading along the saloon-bordered Front Street of Dodge City, a shabby and disreputable figure who smelled of jail.

Deadfalls and honkytonks were ablaze with light. Sounds of revelry drifted through the night—tin-panny piano music, thumping boots in dance halls where Texas drovers were whooping it up, the dry clatter of poker chips, the chime of liquor glasses, and the occasional brassy laughter of some jezebel.

He had never been in Dodge City before, although he had made three trips up the Chisholm Trail. This cowboy capital of the West was the wildest burg Mayo had ever seen, and he had drifted through his share of wild ones since he'd turned twenty-one. The street was jammed with foot traffic—buffalo hunters, a few bluecoated troopers from the nearby fort, railroad men, but mostly Texas cattle drivers in a festive mood.

The Buffalo Hotel turned out to be an unpainted two-story frame building with upper and lower galleries around all four

sides. So long as his mysterious benefactor wanted him to keep out of sight, Mayo decided against entering through the lobby. A rear fire-escape stairway led him to the upper story and a long, murky corridor where coal-oil lamps in wall sconces were being lighted by a white-jacketed old Negro.

At the door of Room 6, Mayo lowered his gear and knocked. Lamplight spilled through a knot hole in the rough pine-board partition. Slingerland had said he would be expecting him.

NOW I find out, Mayo thought, hearing footsteps approaching the door, and the jingle of a key in the mortise lock. Slingerland didn't fork up two hundred pesos just because he saw me sawing wood in the jail yard and took pity on me.

The door opened and Slingerland, hatless and in his shirt sleeves, beckoned him inside.

The room was austerely furnished, in the fashion of the frontier, with a brass four-poster, a marble-topped highboy, a red-painted fire bucket in one corner. The one window, opening on the upper porch, was propped open with a stick of stovewood for ventilation, but not a breath of air swayed the burlap curtains.

"I'm glad to see you, young man," Slingerland said, motioning Mayo toward a chair. "I'll admit, when I left you at the jail this morning, I wasn't sure you'd show up."

Mayo sank gratefully into the cane-bottomed rocker, dumping his saddle and warbag on the uncarpeted floor.

"Least I could do, sir," he said. "You had your reasons for doing a favor for a total stranger. Maybe curiosity brought me here."

Slingerland rolled a half-smoked cigar across his teeth, sizing up his guest thoughtfully.

"You look done in, son. Eat supper tonight?"

Mayo shuddered at the memory of the greasy stew which the Mexican jailer had offered him at sundown. "No, sir."

Slingerland nodded gravely. "I guess you're hungry. I had faith enough in your showing up to reserve a room for you at the far end of the hall. Number 17. Take your stuff up there."

Mayo came to his feet. The offer of a good night's rest, the first he'd had in weeks, was too tempting to decline.

"There's a bathhouse downstairs," Slingerland went on. "I'll stake you to a tub and a shave. By the time you get back to your room I'll have had a decent meal sent up to you. Then I want you to turn in. We can talk tomorrow morning. . . ."

Sunlight, filtered through green window shades, roused Steve Mayo the next morning. For a moment, stretched out between clean sheets and staring at shingled rafters over his bed, he couldn't remember where he was.

He reached under his pillow for his pocket watch. Nine-thirty, the latest he had slept since he could remember. He got up, feeling physically refreshed, mentally cheerful. Now he remembered. This was Room 17 in the Buffalo Hotel in Dodge City, a room which John Slingerland had reserved for him.

He ran up the window shade and peered out at the main drag of the cowtown. Cattle bawled in the shipping pens across town; he heard the dragged-out whistle of an oncoming Santa Fe train. Swampers were cleaning off awninged porches of saloons and gambling dens.

Then he stiffened, seeing a familiar figure down there riding past on a black gelding. It was the Texan who had pistol-whipped him day before yesterday, the man Shelly had called Curt.

He watched the rancher ride out of sight beyond the brick corner of a bank building, and a smoldering sense of unrequited revenge grew inside him. Right now he'd like nothing better than to face Curt over a cocked sixgun and square his account with the man for getting him in trouble here in Dodge.

He wondered where Curt's female companion was this morning. She wouldn't know him now, bathed and shaved and bright of eye. A haircut would help. Then he remembered he didn't have the neces-

sary two bits. He thought dismally, I'll have to brace Slingerland for the price of a breakfast this morning.

Mayo had finished dressing when a knock sounded on his door and Slingerland stepped in, followed by a waiter who placed a steaming tray of food on the highboy. There was a pot of java, fried eggs stripped with crisp bacon, hominy grits, and half a loaf of brown bread with a jar of honey and a plate of butter. Like supper last night, it was food fit for a king.

"Figured you could do with a snack of bait, Steve," Slingerland said. "Feel like a new man?"

MAYO grinned, setting the breakfast tray on the bed and pouring himself a cup of coffee.

"All set," he said. "Ready to listen to your proposition."

Slingerland drew up a chair and sat down. His cottony brows arched; a grin played over his lips. His long-fingered fish-belly-white hands were playing with a nugget watch chain across his black vest front. Those hands puzzled Mayo; they didn't match the sun-bronzed vitality of his face.

"Proposition?" echoed Slingerland.

Buttering a piece of bread, Mayo said, "You don't bail a saddle bum out of jail and furnish him grub and lodging without a price attached. And I don't mean that to sound unfriendly, sir. I'm in your debt. I aim to work this off."

Slingerland lighted a fresh cigar, got it drawing well and studied the glowing tip for several minutes, waiting for his guest to get a good start on his breakfast. Finally he said, "I'm not trying to keep you in suspense, young man. First let me identify myself. I run the roulette layout at the Long Branch Saloon—Luke Shane's place."

A gambler. Mayo thought. That explains the soft white hands, but not the sun-burned face and neck. Roulette croupiers were usually pasty-faced, because of sleeping all day and working all night.

"You took a gamble," Mayo said pleasantly, as he poured his third cup of coffee, "spending your money to turn me loose. I might have hopped another freight."

Slingerland smiled. "A risk I had to take," he said. "Everything in life is a risk. Suffice it to say you turned up here at the hotel as agreed."

Mayo shoved back his empty tray and laced rope-calloused fingers around an updrawn knee, meeting the steely strike of Slingerland's eyes.

"All right," he said, "I guess it's my turn. What do you want to know about me?"

Slingerland flicked ashes off his cheroot. "Well, to begin with, are you on the dodge? Is there a price on that rusty head of yours?"

"If the law were looking for me you wouldn't expect me to admit that, would you?"

Slingerland's smile widened. "Touché. All right, then, question number two. You are in the habit of wearing a gun, but you didn't have any hardware in sight when that railroad conductor turned you over to the marshal. Why?"

Mayo shrugged, gesturing toward his warbag in the corner.

"I've got a forty-five in my soogans. Loading cattle in Abilene last week, I couldn't be bothered toting that much iron on my hip. When I hopped that freight west I left it in my bedroll."

Slingerland got to his feet and began pacing the room. Mayo thought, here it comes.

Finally Slingerland wheeled to face him. "Young man, how would you like to split ten thousand dollars with me for less than five minutes' work?"

Mayo's heart slugged his ribs. "I'm listening," he said.

"At the front end of this hotel, at the end of the hall," Slingerland said, "a cattle buyer for a big Omaha packery has his field office. This is the middle of the beef-buying season. He pays off in cash. He's got a rented safe bulging with money."

Mayo's eyes narrowed. "What are you leading up to, Slingerland?"

Slingerland met Mayo's gave squarely. "Buckle on that gun of yours," he said quietly, "and earn yourself at least five thousand dollars. All it takes is a short

walk down that hall, to Room One."

"Go on, Mr. Slingerland." Mayo clipped the words.

"You knock on the door. This beef buyer will let you in, expecting you to be a cattle shipper up from Texas, wanting a bid on a heard of longhorns."

Mayo pulled in a deep breath. "Instead, he'll find himself looking into the business end of my six-shooter. Is that it?"

SLINGERLAND'S eyes took on a malevolent shine. "That's all there is to it. He'll open the safe—after all, it's his company's money, not his. It'll be in specie and greenbacks, easy to carry. There'll be no need for any rough play. Just tie him up, gag him, and come back to Room Six to divvy up my share."

Mayo was silent for a long moment, tonguing his cheek as if searching Slingerland's plan for weak spots.

As if reading his mind, Slingerland went on hastily, "There's no risk involved. You can have your share, in paper money, in your pants pocket, and be out of this hotel twenty minutes from now. You can buy a fast horse and be on your way before the robbery becomes known. Anyone coming to the door of Room One will find it locked and think nothing of it."

Steve Mayo came to his feet. He walked over to the corner and dumped the contents of his warbag on the floor. Slingerland's jaw was clamped grimly as he saw the Texan untie an army blanket and produce an oak-tanned leather holster containing a cedar-butted Peacemaker.

In dead silence, Mayo jerked open the cylinder, checked the loads. Then he buckled the gun harness around his middle and carefully stowed the rest of his duffle in the bag.

"It's an easy way to get a quick stake," Slingerland was purring softly. "No risk. You're a stranger in Dodge. The buyer won't recognize you. It's a cinch."

"Why," asked Steve Mayo, "don't *you* walk down the hall yourself? Why pay me five thousand dollars to do the job when you could grab off the whole shebang yourself?"

Slingerland spread his hands. "You should know why, son. I'm too well-known in Dodge. The buyer would remember me. He's gambled at my wheel down at the saloon many a night."

"Then why," Mayo persisted, "with Dodge bulging at the seams with gunmen and hard cases, did you pick me out?"

Slingerland's eyes hardened suspiciously. "Because I want this job pulled off by a total stranger, someone who'll shake the dust of Dodge off his boots in a hurry. I saw you chopping wood at the jailhouse yard yesterday. You seemed a likely prospect. And there was always a good chance that you were dodging the law yourself and needed a stake."

Quietly, Steve Mayo lifted his .45 from holster. His thumb dogged the knurled gun hammer to half-cock.

"Mr. Slingerland," he said, "I've eaten your bread and I owe you my escape from that lousy jail to you. But it's no dice."

Slingerland blinked, staring at the muzzle of the gun aimed so carelessly, yet so menacingly, at his chest.

"You mean," he said coldly, "you're doublecrossing me, son?"

"I'm marching you down to face Gabe Hardman, Mr. Slingerland. I'm probably saving that beef buyer's life, by doing that."

Slingerland laughed hollowly. "The marshal would laugh in your face, kid. I'm an influential citizen in this town. I would call you a liar and make it stick."

"Probably. But we're going to give it a try." Mayo gestured toward the door with his gun. "First stop, Room One, to pick up this beef buyer and tell him he'd better keep his loose change in a bank vault, not in a hotel room safe. Next stop the *juzgado.*"

Slingerland licked his lips. Slowly he elevated his arms.

"Just one second, cowboy. We're not leaving this room."

Before Mayo could speak, Slingerland raised his voice and called, "All right, *querida.* Come in."

Mayo stiffened, alert for treachery. He saw the door knob twist and swung his gun toward it, earing the prong to full

cock, fully expecting to see a gun-toter come in, an eavesdropper Slingerland had had stationed out in the corridor to back his play.

But it was the girl in the apricot-colored blouse who stepped into the room, a shaft of sunlight putting a golden sheen on her hair—the girl he had seen at the moment of crawling out of the cattle car day before yesterday, the girl who had been on his side when the Texan with her had clubbed him senseless.

"It's all right, Steve," Shelly said. "Put away your gun. Mr. Slingerland here didn't bail you out of jail. I did."

FROM the tail of his eye Steve Mayo saw Slingerland's arms start to lower. The big man was grinning.

"Stand hitched, both of you, until I figure this thing out!" Mayo snapped. "You, Slingerland—I know how you gamblers operate. You've probably got a pair of derringers stuffed up your sleeve. Don't try to unlimber 'em."

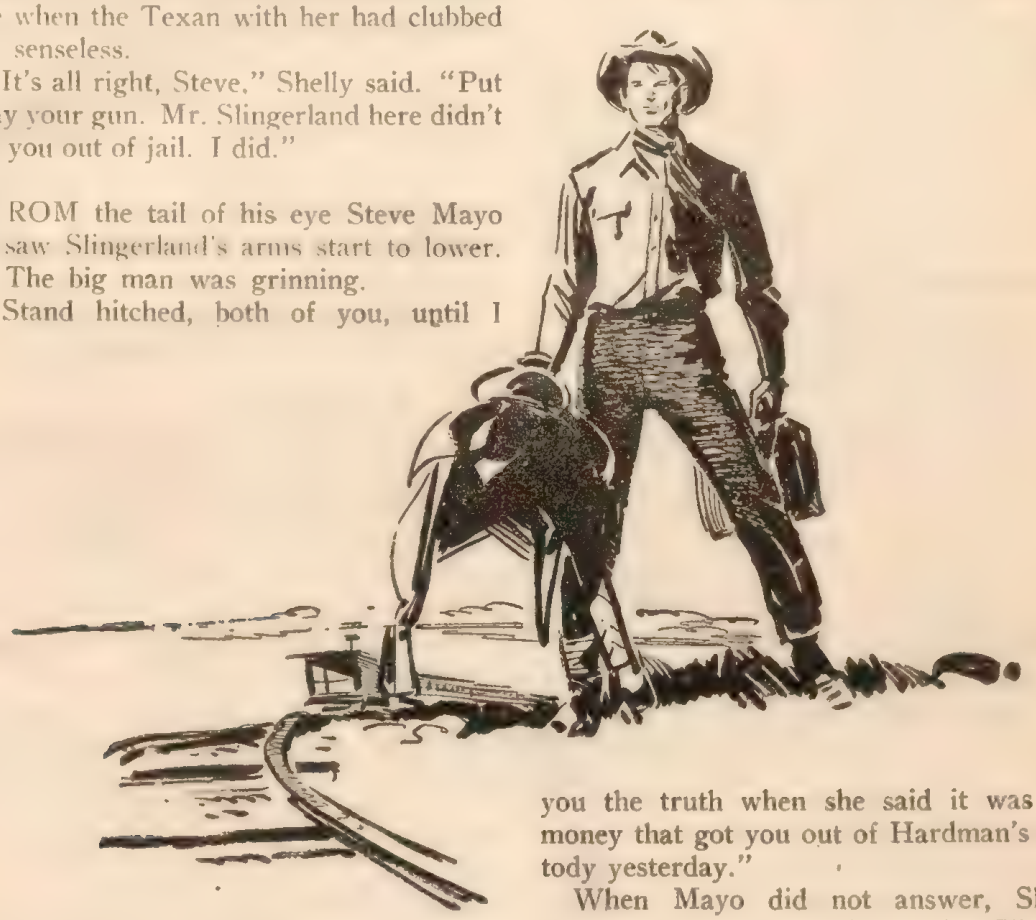
John Slingerland sighed patiently. "Shelly," he said, "talk some sense into this cowboy of yours. That gun may have a hair trigger."

Shelly's eyes were dancing, but she did not move from her place by the door. In Mayo's rigid posture, she recognized the danger of crowding this range rider too far.

"Perhaps," she said demurely, "you'd better introduce me formally to Mr. Mayo, John."

Slingerland's face was brick-red and oozing sweat. His eyes were frozen to the rock-steady gun in Mayo's fist.

"Mayo," he said, hoarsely, "this is Miss Shelly Adams of the Box A Ranch down in the Texas Panhandle. She was telling you the truth when she said it was her money that got you out of Hardman's custody yesterday."



When Mayo did not answer, Shelly Adams said quietly, "And John Slingerland isn't a gambler, Steve. He happens to be the Dodge City representative of the Knight and Knight meat packing house in Omaha. The ten thousand dollars he was referring to happens to be in *his* safe. It's the money he is going to pay me for the Box A herd my crew is loading right this minute."

Steve Mayo carefully lowered his gun hammer to the firing pin. None of this made sense. His brain was in a turmoil trying to unravel what this pair were telling him.

Two minutes ago he had been propositioned to hold up a beef buyer at gun point; now that beef buyer turned out to be Slingerland himself. Yesterday morning at the jail, Slingerland had posted his bail—if Hardman's bribe money could be called a bail fee.

Now Shelly Adams was claiming *she* had had him released from jail.

"It's really very simple, Mayo," Slingerland said, lowering his arms with relief. "Miss Adams is in a desperate situation. She needs help—help I am in no position to offer her. She feels, and so do I in view of what has just transpired in this room, that you are the man destiny sent along two days ago to help her out of her terrible jam."

Mayo shoved his gun into leather. A sheepish grin touched his lips.

"Let's all sit down," he suggested, "and hash this thing out. What kind of trouble are you in, ma'am?"

Shelly Adams crossed in front of Slingerland to sit down on the rumpled bed alongside Mayo.

"You remember the man I was with at the stockyards when your train pulled in the other day?"

Mayo lifted a hand to rub the scab-crusted welt on his cheekbone.

"I won't soon forget that walloper," he said ruefully. "Saw him riding down the street this morning. I'd have liked to take a pot shot at him."

Shelly's luminous eyes clouded. "His name is Curt Randum," she said. "He's my foreman and trail boss for the drive north. The trick he played on you, the bloodthirstiness of the man's nature, ought to tell you the type of man Curt Randum is."

Mayo said, "I don't aim to leave Dodge without cleaning Randum's plow for him. I wouldn't have been in this mess if he hadn't stuck in his taw. I had that brakeman whipped fair."

Shelly Adams shook her head. "I've got one thing to thank Curt for. If he hadn't slugged you, I wouldn't be talking to you now, laying all my cards face up on the table."

MAYO felt a strange tingling go through him, just meeting this girl's eyes. The heady scent of her, some subtle perfume perhaps, put a riot in his senses. He had never seen a more infinitely desirable woman . . . and she was appealing to him for help of some kind. To Steve Mayo, a total stranger out of nowhere—maybe an owlhooter, for all she knew.

"So far," he said, and grinned, "I haven't seen many cards, ma'am. I know you're up from the Panhandle with a herd of mossyhorns, but that doesn't make sense, either, a girl like you traveling with a trail herd."

Across the room, John Slingerland cleared his throat for attention. Mayo had completely forgotten the beef buyer's presence.

"Miss Adams," Slingerland said, "is as good as any cowhand on her payroll. Her father is an invalid. He was gored by a bull last year and now is confined to his bed for life. That's why Royce Adams isn't selling his beef in Dodge this year—the first season he's missed since Seventy-four."

Mayo shifted position uneasily. "So far, so good," he said. "But where do I fit into the picture?"

Shelly reached out to lay her hand on his. Her touch was like a jolt of electricity, almost. It reminded him of the time he had once touched the terminals of a telegraph outfit.

"You see, Steve, what Mr. Slingerland did today, offering you five thousand dollars to rob a beef buyer, was what you might call a test of your character. I trusted you from the moment I laid eyes on you—a dirty, whiskery saddle bum crawling out of an empty railroad car. But Mr. Slingerland wasn't one to believe in a woman's intuition. He had to test you, prove that you're a man to ride the river with."

Slingerland laughed softly. "Turning down my offer, fixing to march me over to the law—that took guts, Steve. You passed your test with flying colors."

Mayo's jaw dropped in astonishment. He said to Shelly, "How could *you* trust me, without proof? How could you know I would be honest?"

The girl smiled softly and withdrew her hand. "You told me so yourself when Curt tried to bait you into selling your saddle. You were in a desperate predicament, facing that brakeman. You knew what hoboes are in for here in Dodge. Yet you refused to sell your saddle to buy your way out of that predicament. That told me a lot, Steve Mayo. A Texan might be down and out, you said, but never so down and out he'd sell his saddle. That told me what kind of a man you were, as much as if I'd known you all my life."

A crimson tide of embarrassment rose up the muscle-corded column of Mayo's neck and suffused his cheeks.

"So now I'm waiting for your hole card, ma'am," he managed to blurt out. "You say you're in trouble, and that maybe I'm the man to get you out of it. What's the deal?"

Shelly Adams came to her feet, her palms smoothing out the folds of her split doeskin riding skirt.

"I want to hire you," she said bluntly, "to escort me out of Kansas, across the Strip, down to the Panhandle and my home on the Box A. That's all."

Steve Mayo stared up at her as if unwilling to believe what his ears had heard.

"You mean you'd take that long a trip, night camps and all that, with a stranger? You're asking me to ride herd on you clear back to Texas?"

Shelly Adam's eyes went misty. "Yes. I know it sounds—well, you know how it sounds. As if I'm cheap, a common trollop. But I'd feel as safe with you, night camps and all, as if I were in God's pocket, Steve. A man who wouldn't sell his saddle wouldn't molest a girl."

Steve Mayo came unsteadily to his feet, overwhelmed with his own turbulent emotions. He was thinking wildly, why, I'd give ten years of my life to be alone with you, Shelly Adams. How loco can a man get, knowing a woman as short a time as I've known you?

ALOUD he choked out, "But why hire *me* to bodyguard you, ma'am? Your foreman, your crew will be going back to Texas directly, soon as the beef is shipped."

John Slingerland stepped into the range of Mayo's vision. Reaching under the lapel of his fustian coat, he drew out a thick packet of greenbacks.

"Here's what you'd be guarding back to Texas, son," the Omaha beef buyer said gravely. "Ten thousand some-odd dollars, the price my packery bid for the Box A herd. That's thirty dollars a head for a jag of around three hundred and forty longhorns, prime as they come. A small herd, but lard-fat; they drew the highest bid Knight and Knight has made this season."

Wordlessly, Shelly Adams reached out to take the packet of money, and thrust it under her blouse.

"You spoke of my crew, my foreman," she said to Mayo. "I'm paying off my men. They'll spend their wages carrousing here in Dodge and come straggling back to the home ranch in their own good time—some of them. You ought to know Texas cowboys, Steve, being one yourself. They're a fiddle-footed lot."

Understanding came to Steve Mayo at last.

"You're trying to tell me you're afraid to go back home in your foreman's company. You think Curt Randum might have an eye on that beef money."

Mayo saw something like fear come into Shelly's eyes.

"I not only think it—I know it," she said. "Coming north, the night we forded the Canadian, only a week on the trail, Curt and my crew had a pow-wow while I was asleep in the hoodlum wagon. They were debating whether to have me meet an 'accident' in a stampede, or drown in the river, or whether to wait until the herd was sold and then grab the payoff."

Shock touched Mayo's face.

"You know that for a fact, ma'am?"

She nodded. "Dad's old cook, Primotivo Gonzales, overheard the whole thing. They caught him crawling through the brush to eavesdrop a little better. Curt—" her voice choked with the bitterness of the memory— "knifed old Primo and tossed him into the river. But Primo managed to get ashore

and come to my wagon. He told me what he'd heard. Primo died in my arms, and I had to drag him out into the chaparral and bury him as best I could so Curt wouldn't know I was wise to what he was planning."

Admiration glowed in Mayo's eyes. "You should have saddled and rode right then," he said. "But instead you gambled and came all the way to Dodge with the herd."

The cattle buyer said quietly, "That's the kind of woman Shelly Adams is, Steve. And now she's got ten thousand dollars to get safely back to her father's hands. She doesn't know a soul she can trust except me, and I'm too old for riding."

Shelly linked her arm through Mayo's and turned a smile on the cattle buyer. "I'm not entirely alone," she told him. "I've got Steve Mayo." She stepped back and looked up at the lean young Texan. "You'll do it, won't you, Steve?"

Thoughts churned through Mayo's head. He remembered his vow, upon leaving Abilene, never to return to Texas again, where only bad luck had been his lot from his early years as a range knockabout, orphaned by Comanches in babyhood.

Now he reached out to grip Shelly's hand.

"Deal me in," he said simply. "We'll make it to the Box A, Shelly. You can bank on that."

Relief flooded the girl's face. Then she became brisk, businesslike.

"*Bueno,*" she said. "We've got to work fast. Curt Randum is expecting to leave for the south with me tomorrow morning. By then you and I will be long gone, Steve. We'll leave Dodge secretly, after dark tonight."

LIFTING the money roll from her blouse, she peeled off two hundred-dollar bills.

"You've got a saddle," she said, "as I well know. Buy two horses, the best you can find. I can't draw one from the Box A cavvy without my men getting suspicious. I'll be waiting for you in Room Five, down the hall. We'll ride as soon as it gets dark."

Steve Mayo reached for his Stetson, stuffing the currency into his chaps pocket.

"I'll make the rounds of the horse traders beginning now," he said. "You'll need a saddle and we'll need grub and ammunition." He paused, frowning. "I'd give a heap to settle my account with Curt Randum before we pull out," he added. "If you know he knifed that Mexican cook on the trail coming north, we could have Marshal Hardman arrest him."

Slingerland and the girl shook their heads in unison.

"No, Mayo," the beef buyer said gravely. "It would be Randum's word against Shelly's. Old Primotivo is supposed to have drowned in the Canadian. Randum has 'witnesses' to back that up. No, the thing to do is get out of Dodge and hit the trail without Randum knowing what's up until he comes around to pick up Miss Adams in the morning."

Mayo turned to Shelly. "I'll be knocking on the door of Room Five as soon as it gets good and dark," he said. "I'll have our horses ready and waiting. We'll sneak out of this hotel by the back fire escape. If Randum's got spies covering you, ma'am, he won't see us leave."

Then Steve Mayo was gone, and Shelly Adams and old Slingerland heard the solid strike of his boot heels as he headed toward the stairs leading down to the lobby.

Shelly sat down, reaction overtaking her. She said to her old friend, "You think I'm doing the right thing, John? You don't think I'm being foolish?"

Slingerland slid his arm around her. "Shelly," he said, "you know I think as much of you as I would if you were my own daughter. Your father's one of my oldest and closest friends. I'd say to him, just as I'm saying to you now, Steve Mayo is a man to ride the river with. He'll get you and your dad's money home safely."

They left Mayo's room together. At the door of Room 5 Slingerland tarried long enough to get the girl's signature on an official beef receipt. Then, getting her promise to rest during the remainder of the day in preparation for the all-night ride she would be making toward the Kansas border with Mayo, Slingerland went across the hall and into his own room.

Going over to a corner, the beef buyer pulled a curtain aside, revealing the iron safe in which he kept his papers. Unlike the fictional cattle buyer he had bribed Steve Mayo to hold up, he kept the bulk of his company's funds in a Dodge City bank.

Locking up Shelly's receipt, Slingerland put on his coat, preparatory to going down to the stockyards to see if any new cattle herds had arrived overnight for him to inspect and bid on. He was heading for the door when it opened without the formality of a knock.

Shelly's foreman, Curt Random, stepped inside. The Box A ramrod was accompanied by his *segundo*, a lanky, straw-haired Texan who was known as the Kiowa Kid.

"Howdy, John," Curt Randum said, running splayed fingers through his close-cropped rust-red hair. "The boss sent me around. Glad to catch you before you go to the yards."

Slingerland frowned. "Shelly Adams sent you? Why?"

Randum grinned. "To pick up her beef receipts. The old man wants me to ride herd on the dinero. It's no job for a woman."

SLINGERLAND fingered his white goatee, trying to cover up the revulsion he felt for this pair. He remembered Shelly telling him upon her arrival in Dodge three days ago that the Kiowa Kid was the cowboy who had seen old Primo Gonzales "drown" in the Canadian River en route north. These toughs were two of a kind.

"You tell Shelly," Slingerland said, "I'll have to go down to the Stockman's Bank to pick up her money. I understood you two would be remaining in Dodge overnight, leaving tomorrow. I never draw any funds for my customers until the last minute."

Randum hitched his gunbelts, shooting a sidelong glance at the Kiowa Kid. The *segundo*, Slingerland noticed uncomfortably, had edged past him, and now the two had him boxed in. Not accustomed to wearing guns, Slingerland felt a stab of panic. Knowing what he did of this pair, that Randum was a killer and the Kiowa Kid his right-hand man and a gunman in his own right, Slingerland knew he was facing danger.

"Your memory's slipping, isn't it, John?" Randum whispered. "You drew out the Box A ten thousand this morning, soon as the bank opened. You brought it straight to the hotel."

The color drained from Slingerland's face. "You're mistaken, Randum. I withdrew enough to pay my hotel bill."

The Kiowa Kid crossed the room and jerked the curtain away from the safe.

"Open up, John," the *segundo* drawled. "If your memory isn't slipping like Curt said, the money'll be in this strongbox."

Slingerland shifted position, the slow beginning of fear making him stiffen.

"Get out of here," he said harshly. "When it comes time to turn any money over to Box A I will give it to Shelly direct."

At the ominous double click of a gun hammer coming to cock Slingerland turned, to find himself facing the Kiowa' Kid's long-barreled Frontier Colt.

Simultaneously Curt Randum stooped to lift a shiny-bladed bowie knife from a sheath in one bootleg. He drew the razor-honed edge across this thumb.

Slingerland thought wildly, that knife was the one you stabbed that Mexican cook with down on the Canadian!

John Slingerland was not afraid now. He said in a cold, dead voice, "What is this, Randum—a stick-up?"

Sunlight glittered on the bowie in Randum's fist.

"Just checking, John. Just making sure Shelly's money isn't in that iron box. Won't hurt to show her foreman you're telling the truth, would it, John?"

Slingerland turned his back on Randum, his muscles tensing as if in expectation of a blade driving through his ribs. Without a word he brushed past the Kiowa Kid's gun and knelt beside the safe.

He thought, they won't find anything but loose change here. I've got to talk them into letting me go down to the bank with them, to save my hide. Maybe I can signal

a teller, make a break for it. Even Randum wouldn't have the nerve to gun me down in broad daylight.

The combination dial spun through its series of numbers and Slingerland pulled the heavy laminated iron door open.

"See for yourself," he said. "The Box A money is still in the ba—"

Slingerland didn't feel the knife. The weight of Randum's sinewy arm was behind the stabbing thrust. The ten-inch blade could have been a hot wire going through butter, so easily did it drive through clothing and muscle to sever the beef buyer's spinal cord.

Randum had learned his knife wizardry down in Mexico, years before. He knew Slingerland was dead when the white-haired old packery buyer slumped sideward in front of the safe, a last breath seeping across his lips to flutter his snowy mustache.

Wiping the blade clean on Slingerland's coat, Randum returned the weapon to its scabbard. Stepping over the dead man, he began to examine the contents of the safe with feverish haste, while the Kiowa Kid peered over his shoulder.

THE tin box labeled "Petty Cash" yielded a few dollars in loose gold and silver. A metal drawer contained Slingerland's hunting case watch, which Randum tossed to the Kid. The safe contained nothing else but dossiers of business papers and the beef buyer's ledgers.

"It's not here," Randum panted hoarsely, when the safe stood empty. "You botched it, Kid, telling me Slingerland drew the Box A money out of the bank."

The color fled from the Kid's swarthy face.

"I tell you I was standing in line at the teller's cage behind Slingerland! I saw him and the cashier count that dinero, ten thousand some-odd dollars. Maybe it's in his pockets."

The two men rolled Slingerland over on his back and went through his pockets thoroughly. The buyer's wallet contained less than twenty dollars in bills. He wore no money belt.

Sweat sparkled on Randum's ruddy face. He felt a sick sense of self-anger at the way he had handled this thing.

The Kiowa Kid picked up a packet marked *Receipts, Current.* Shuffling through the bundle of papers it contained, he handed the topmost one to Randum. "There's your answer," the Kid said. "Shelly's already been paid."

Randum stared at the paper. It was dated July 11, 1883—today's date. The blank spaces were filled in with Slingerland's neat Spencerian writing.

Received $10,200 in payment for 340 steers branded Box A, Texas Brand Registery, at $30.00 per head.

The receipt was signed Royce Adams, per Shelly Adams.

Randum came to his feet, crumpling the receipt in his fist. "Shelly's got a room in this hotel," he whispered. "You wait here. I'll go down and check the register, find out which room." He paused, eying the Kid curiously. "Nothing left now but to tackle Shelly. You game to kill a woman, Kid?"

The Kiowa Kid shrugged. "For ten thousand pesos," he said, "I'd throw my own grandmother to the dogs." He fished a sack of tobacco from his plaid shirt and started building a cigarette as casually as if they were discussing the weather.

Randum left. His cigarette twisted and licked, the Kiowa Kid plumbed his pockets for a match and did not find one. Randum had appropriated Slingerland's fancy flint-and-steel cigar lighter.

Then the Kid remembered that the wall lamps out in the corridor were still burning. He went to the door, had a look to see that the hall was deserted, and headed or the nearest lamp.

He was lifting the chimney to fire his smoke at the wick flame when the door directly opposite Slingerland's room opened and Shelly Adams stepped out. She was at the door of Room 6 when the Kiowa Kid spoke. "Don't go in there, ma'am. Slingerland's dressing."

Shelly whirled, startled. Then she relaxed as she recognized the cavy wrangler from her own crew.

"Aren't you supposed to be helping the

boys load, Kid?" she asked sharply.

The Kiowa Kid flicked aside his unsmoked cigarette and headed toward her. Something about his smile made Shelly recoil.

"I come up to have a talk with Slingerland," he said. "Found out our tally was wrong. He's got to buy eleven more steers."

Something like relief touched the girl. She said shakily, "It's all right, Kiowa—about the count, I mean. I was just going in to talk to John Slingerland. I'll tell him."

Shelly was caught off-guard by the Kiowa Kid's next move. Without warning his left arm shot out behind her and his heavy palm clamped itself around her mouth, stifling her involuntary cry of terror.

With his right arm the puncher caught her up bodily at the knees as easily as if she were a child.

Struggling violently, Shelly felt the Kiowa Kid turn around and step across the hall to shove open the door of Room 5 with his knee.

Powerless to break the throttle hold on her mouth, Shelly tried to bite the calloused hand. The Kiowa Kid edged through the door and pressed it shut with a spurred boot heel.

"I want that dinero Slingerland paid you this morning, Shelly," he whispered savagely at her ear. "But first off I got to gag and hog-tie you."

STEVE MAYO retraced his steps to the Buffalo Hotel before paying his first visit to a horse trader. It had occurred to him that he should tote his saddle and plunder bag with him, to have his gear handy when it came time to leave tonight. No use leaving that till the last minute.

Entering the hotel lobby, he was heading toward the stairs when he caught sight of a familiar figure standing at the reception desk leafing through the hotel register.

It was Curt Randum, Shelly's double-crossing ramrod.

Mayo's first impulse was to thrust a gun in the man's ribs. Then he remembered John Slingerland's urgent advice to forget Curt Randum and concentrate on getting out of town with Shelly Adams without the foreman's knowledge.

Randum was engrossed in his study of the register, running a blunt forefinger up and down the ruled lines, apparently checking signatures. His back was to the lobby; he had not seen Mayo come in. Mayo doubted, anyway, if the Box A foreman would have recognized him as the unkempt hobo he had pistol-whipped.

Mayo headed on upstairs, out of Randum's view. His own room, Number 17, was at the far end of the corridor; but as he passed Room 6, on his left, he decided that John Slingerland ought to know that Randum was downstairs.

He tapped his knuckles on the door of Slingerland's room but got no answer. Maybe the beef buyer had left the hotel to confer with Texas stockmen down at the yards. Or maybe he and Shelly were still down in Room 17 where he had left them.

Steve Mayo never knew what prompted him to test the knob of Slingerland's room. The door was unlocked. Opening it, the Texan caught sight of a pair of Hussar-booted legs, toes spread apart and pointing at the ceiling, over behind the bed.

"John!" Mayo gasped the name under his breath as he stepped into the room.

His first thought was that Slingerland had had a fainting spell, aggravated by the extreme heat of this day. Then, rounding the edge of the bed to stare down at the beef buyer, Mayo saw the puddle of blood seeping along the floor under Slingerland's back.

One look at the staring, sightless eyes, at the ghastly pallor underlying the sun-bronzed skin, told Mayo that death had struck Slingerland down. He rolled the body over on its side and saw the blood-soaked coat, the tiny slit made by the knife that had snuffed out this good man's life.

Mayo came to his feet, hard hit. Then he saw the open door of the safe, the books and papers scattered around. Whoever had murdered Slingerland had robbed his safe.

His first thought was, this'll hit Shelly hard.

The beef buyer's body was still warm.

Obviously he had been killed within the past few minutes.

Palming a sixgun, Steve Mayo walked out into the hall. Directly opposite him was a door with the numeral "5" painted on it. That must be Shelly's room.

He crossed the hall and had lifted a fist to knock when some deep-rooted instinct caused him to hold his arm in that cocked position. Holding his breath, he put an ear to the door. He heard furtive movements inside, someone moving around. Maybe it was Shelly. Then again, maybe it wasn't.

THE puncher knelt to peer through the keyhole. The old-fashioned aperture gave him a fair view of a segment of the room.

Shelly Adams, her face half obscured by a blue bandanna gag knotted between her jaws, was lying across the bed. Her arms had been trussed behind her back with a strip of torn blanket. He could see a pulse hammering on the column of her throat, above the torn collar of her apricot-colored shirt.

A moving body shut off Mayo's view of the girl. It must be the blurred shadow of whoever had tied Shelly up.

With infinite stealth, Steve Mayo twisted the doorknob, slowly so as not to attract the attention of whoever was inside with the girl. When the catch was withdrawn from its socket he pushed at the door, felt it stop. It was bolted from the inside.

Panic touched Mayo then, as he heard a man's boots coming up the lobby stairs behind him. If that was Curt Randum—

The door of Room 7, next to Shelly's stood open. Mayo wheeled toward it and inside an unoccuped room. He eased the door shut and peered out the crack into the hall. Red-headed Curt Randum came into view now, climbing the stairs from the lobby.

Randum headed toward Slingerland's room, glanced up and down the hall, then went inside. Mayo heard his muffled cry. "Kid?"

The door of Slingerland's room suddenly opened again and Randum came out into the hall. Mayo thought he saw Slingerland's body. He was trying to make up his mind whether to step out and throw a gun on the Box A foreman, when Randum spun on his heel and headed for the stairs at a reaching stride.

A soft breath of air touched the nape of Mayo's neck. He turned, saw that the window overlooking the porch was wide open. There would be a similar window fronting Shelly's room, next door.

Curt Randum was gone. He had discovered a corpse and was making tracks in a hurry. Whoever was in Room 5 with Shelly, then, must be Slingerland's murderer.

Mayo tiptoed across the room and crawled out the window onto the porch which overlooked a side street. The noises of Dodge City did not reach his ears, though his senses were whetted to a fine edge now. Shelly's life might hang in the balance, depending on how he handled this thing.

Reaching Shelly's window, he was relieved to find it propped open. He had only to straddle the low sill to face the girl's attacker.

Cuffing back his Stetson, Mayo had a quick look into the room. He was close enough to the bed to reach out and touch Shelly's outflung golden tresses.

Then he saw a plaid-shirted man over in the far corner, jerking drawers from a chiffonier.

"It's got to be here someplace," the fellow was panting hoarsely. "It's got to be in this room."

Ducking low to clear the window sash, Steve Mayo got one leg over the sill.

"Reach, hombre. Don't turn around. You're covered."

Across the room, the Kiowa Kid stiffened as if he had been struck in the back. Mayo, pulling his other leg over the window ledge to stand in the narrow opening next to Shelly's bed, heard an inarticulate sound from behind her gag as she caught sight of him.

Then the Kiowa Kid wheeled around, shoulders dropping in a gunman's crouch. For a split fraction of a second the Kid stared at the silhouetted figure of the man

who had entered the window behind him.

And then, choking out an oath, the Kiowa Kid dug for his gun.

Mayo saw the cowhand's thumb ear the hammer back, saw incoherent, blind panic in those slitted eyes, knew this now was a kill-or-be-killed situation. This gunhawk was choosing suicide to capture!

IN THE shaved instant it took the Kiowa Kid's gun muzzle to clear leather and whip up to a level pointing, Mayo fired. The big Colt bucked and thundered against the crotch of his hand.

Recoil kicked the fuming Colt muzzle toward the ceiling. Through a mounting smudge of gunsmoke Mayo saw blood spout from a bullet hole punched through the bridge of his target's nose.

The Kiowa Kid slammed back against the open drawers of the chiffonier. The heavy sixgun in his hand slid unfired to the floor. Then his knees buckled and he toppled sideward and back, his head hitting the pine board wall. His body settled in a grotesque sitting position there, his head dropping forward on his chest, blood spilling onto his bullhide chaps.

Holstering his gun, Steve Mayo came around the foot of the bed and helped Shelly to sit up. His hands trembled as he clawed at the knotted bandanna and freed the girl of her restricting gag.

"That was the Kiowa Kid, my cavvy wrangler," she said after she had sucked a deep breath into her lungs. "He was after that ten thousand in beef money, Steve."

Mayo was busy with his jack-knife, severing the strips of blanket which held the girl's wrists behind her back and bound her legs at knee and ankle.

"I came back to the hotel for my gear," he panted, when the job was done and Shelly was coming shakily to her feet. "Saw Curt Random down in the lobby. He didn't see me. When I got upstairs I decided Slingerland ought to know about Randum being on the prowl so close, and—"

Mayo's voice trailed off. Something in her eyes told Shelly that the Texan had bad news for her.

"John's—all right?" she whispered.

He shook his head, knowing what a shock what he must say would be.

"He's dead, Shelly, stabbed in the back. Must have happened when he was putting something in his safe." Mayo gestured toward the Kiowa Kid. "He did it, I reckon. I left Slingerland's room, had a look through your keyhole, and saw what had happened to you."

Shelly sat down on the bed, pressing her hands to her head.

"The Kid admitted he was after that money," she said, struggling for control. "He—searched me, made sure I didn't have it on me, after he'd tied me up. Then he began ransacking the room."

Mayo glanced around. The whole room was in disorder. A closet had been opened, linen and spare bedding pulled out onto the floor. A pair of saddlebags hanging over a chair had been emptied, but it had mostly held extra clothing and personal things Shelly had carried up from Texas on the trail drive.

"But he didn't find the money? Or did you give it back to John Slingerland after I left?"

Shelly shook her head. Rising, she pulled the covers off the bed, lifted the end of the mattress and reached under it, next to the rusty springs. When her hand came up it held the roll of currency Slingerland had turned over to her.

"I had planned to take a nap," she said. "I don't know what prompted me to hide the money. And I certainly don't know why the Kid didn't look under the mattress the first thing."

Mayo said grimly, "It's lucky he didn't. Only reason he didn't kill you at the start was so he could torture you into telling where the dinero was if he didn't find it."

Shelly averted her gaze from the dead man in the corner.

"We know Curt Randum was back of the Kiowa Kid's murdering John," she said in a hushed tone. "You say Curt is downstairs now?"

"No," Mayo said, and told her of the brief glimpse he'd had of Randum entering and leaving Slingerland's room. "My guess

is that Randum sent the Kid to rob Slingerland, got tired of waiting for the hombre to show up and had a look at the hotel register to find out which was Slingerland's room."

Shelly said weakly, "And when he found John dead he must have thought the Kid had doublecrossed him and high-tailed with the loot. Where does that leave us, Steve?"

MAYO took a turn around the room. Sprawled against the wall was a dead man, the first human life Mayo had ever taken. By rights he knew he should head immediately for the jail and notify the town marshal of what had happened. But that would bring up complications. Gabe Hardman might want to detain him as a witness, in which case he and Shelly might not get away from Dodge City for weeks. Besides, he didn't trust Gabe Hardman.

"Right now," Mayo said finally, "I think Room Seventeen—my room—is the place for you to hide out, Shelly. We can't have Randum showing up here, looking for you, and discovering the Kid's body. And it wouldn't do for us to be seen leaving the hotel together. Randum might spot us and put two and two together."

While Mayo gathered Shelly's scattered possessions together and packed them back in her *alforja* pouches, he had to argue the girl out of going into Slingerland's room to pay her last respects to an old friend. As soon as Shelly was safely in his room at the far end of the hall, Mayo decided to lock Slingerland's room, so a housemaid wouldn't discover the beef buyer's body and bring the law swarming to the hotel.

Deciding to leave the door of the girl's room locked and bolted as the Kiowa Kid had had it, Mayo helped Shelly Adams through the window and along the second-floor gallery to the window of Room 17.

"I haven't had time to buy our horses for the trip south," Mayo said. He shuddered at the thought of what might have happened to Shelly if he had gone on with his original intention of touring the Dodge City horse markets. "So the thing for you to do is hole up here in my room until I come for you tonight. Don't let anybody in. Keep that window closed and the blind down."

Opening his warbag, Mayo fished out an extra gun—a single-action Army Colt .44—and a box of ammunition. He loaded the revolver and handed it to Shelly.

"You know how to handle one of these things, I reckon?"

The girl managed a thin smile. "Dad taught me how to shoot before I was knee-high to a calf, Steve."

"*Bueno.* I wouldn't feel right leaving you here without a way to defend yourself. Not that I expect that kind of trouble. If Curt Randum should be looking for you he wouldn't come here."

Mayo dragged his warbag and sacked saddle over to the door. He took the key dangling from the inside of the door lock and handed it to Shelly.

Her eyes were brimming with tears as she looked up at him. Whether it was reaction from the violent ordeal she had weathered, or a belated realization of the tragedy that had struck down her friend John Slingerland, Mayo couldn't tell.

She took his hand and placed something in it.

"I want you to start taking care of that now, Steve," she murmured. "It will let you know how much I trust you."

Mayo stared down at the roll of greenbacks in his hand—her father's beef money. Ten thousand dollars was more money than he had ever seen in one chunk—a young fortune which had already cost two men their lives this morning.

Wordlessly he unbuttoned his shirt and stowed the packet of currency in his canvas money belt. Then, meeting Shelly's gaze, he felt his senses getting out of control, the blood pounding thickly in his throat.

"Shelly," he said breathlessly, "don't get me wrong, but I—"

"Yes, Steve?"

"Seems like I've got to kiss you. I've simply got to."

She came toward him. "Why don't you, then?" she said in the softest of voices. "Don't you know by now that I feel the same way?"

HE REACHED for her, pulling her close, and her lips lifted to meet the demanding pressure of his own. The soft swell of her bosom crushing against his chest put a maddening desire in his blood; her arms were pulling his head down, her whole being was responding to his kiss.

How long they stood like that, neither was aware. It was a sound of excited voices in the hall that broke them apart, shattering the magic spell of the moment.

Releasing Shelly, Mayo moved to the door and took a quick look down the hall. Then he ducked back, his face suddenly so bleak it frightened her.

"What is it, Steve?"

"Randum and Gabe Hardman just came out of Slingerland's room. Your ramrod must have lit a shuck for the marshal's office. I don't quite savvy that move."

Shelly smiled bitterly. "I do, knowing Curt so well. He thinks the Kiowa Kid knifed John and made off with my money. So Curt's sicking the law onto the Kid."

Loud, jolting noises sounded from the front of the hotel. Mayo cracked open his door for another look. Curt Random and the Dodge City marshal were driving their shoulders in unison against Shelly's door. Smashing the lock, they disappeared inside her room.

"They've busted into your room, Shelly," Mayo said. "So now Randum knows the Kid's dead. He knows you didn't shoot him, because you were not packing a gun. Yet you've disappeared. Hard to say what Randum and the marshal will do next."

Shelly was chalk pale. "Maybe we'd better go out there and face them," she said, "and tell Hardman the truth."

Mayo thought that over. If only he could trust Hardman!

"No, we don't dare risk it," he said finally. "I think Gabe Hardman is the next thing to being an outlaw himself. That bail money he accepted from Slingerland was a plain and simple bribe, any way you figure it. It went into Hardman's pocket, not a court's."

"But," argued Shelly, "the marshal doesn't have anything against us. And we can't prove Randum had anything to do with the Kid going into Slingerland's room in the first place."

Indecision was in Steve Mayo. "We can't prove who knifed Slingerland, no. You see the position it would put me in if I confessed to shooting the Kid? How do we know Hardman would believe our story that it was self-defense?"

Shelly nodded in resignation.

"We'll carry out the original plan," Mayo said. Picking up his gear, he carried it over to the window. "You lie low in this room till I come for you after dark. Got to get our horses and supplies."

Shelly followed him across the room. "You won't take any chances, will you, Steve?"

He climbed out of the window, feeling the pressure of time running against him. Any moment might bring Gabe Hardman down the hall to make a room-by-room check.

"I'll be all right, Shelly. You close this window and don't let anybody in. *Hasta la vista.*"

He shouldered his sacked saddle and warbag and rounded the corner of the second-story porch, making for the rear fire-escape stairway.

He was down the steps and heading toward the alley flanking the Buffalo Hotel when a heavy-set man wearing the uniform of a Third Infantry sergeant from Fort Dodge moved away from the wall at the foot of the stairs.

The soldier had a gun in his ham-like hand.

"Where you think you're going, Texican?" the sergeant demanded. "Skipping out on your room rent?"

Steve Mayo attempted a grin. This was no time to get into an argument.

"Since when did you soldier boys start policing the town, Sarge?"

The trooper moved over to ram his gun barrel into Mayo's belly. "So happens," he said, "I'm on military police patrol. Town marshal picked me up, told me there'd been a killing in the Buffalo Hotel this morning. He posted me here to guard the back exits. Nobody can leave without Gabe Hardman's say-so."

DESPAIR wilted Mayo. This was a tougher break than he had anticipated. To resist detention by this soldier would justify the sergeant in shooting him down. He made no move to resist as the soldier reached to take his gun from holster and thrust it under his own tunic belt.

"Like I said, bucko," the sergeant growled, "nobody's leaving this hotel, front or back, without the marshal's permission. Hardman's making his investigation of that killing now. You might as well unload your gear."

Lowering his saddle and warbag to the ground, Mayo heard a door slam somewhere overhead and a drumming of footsteps on the floor of the upper gallery. A voice lashed out sharply. "Bagged some game, Sergeant Maroney?"

Sergeant Maroney and Mayo looked up. Marshal Hardman was leaning over the railing directly overhead.

"Caught a man running out on his hotel bill," Maroney called back. "Or maybe he's the hombre you're looking for. Seemed to be in an all-powerful hurry."

Hardman yelled, "Hold the walloper! I'm coming down."

As the town marshal started down the steep fire escape, Mayo's spirits wilted. Following Hardman was Curt Randum.

Reaching the ground, the two men stared at Maroney's prisoner.

"Haven't I seen you somewhere before?" Curt Randum snapped. "What's your outfit?"

The marshal was rubbing his stubbled jaw thoughtfully, studying Mayo's face.

"Wa-it a min-ute!" he drawled, as an idea dawned. "I place this ranny. You're Steve Mayo, the bum John Slingerland bailed out of my hoosegow."

Mayo saw recognition light in Curt Randum's green eyes.

"The Texan who wouldn't sell his saddle!" the Box A foreman cried. "Didn't recognize him, shaved and slicked up." Randum turned to the marshal. "You say John Slingerland bailed this one out of jail?"

Hardman nodded. "Sure did. Two hundred bucks." Fiendish pleasure kindled in the marshal's eyes as he turned to Sergeant Maroney. "I've got a notion you've caught a big fish, Sarge. I'm obliged. I think Mayo paid back Slingerland's favor by knifing him and making off with some cash Slingerland was holding for Randum's outfit here."

Reaching in a hip pocket of his bibless overalls, Hardman drew out a pair of rusty handcuffs.

"Stick out your hands, Mayo," the marshal ordered. "You're under arrest."

Mayo froze. "For what?"

"Suspicion of murdering a cattle buyer up in Room Six—the man who bailed you out of my jail day before yesterday. And maybe salivating Randum's cavvy wrangler in Room Five."

Mayo was vaguely aware of Hardman notching the iron fetters over his wrists. Sergeant Maroney was saying, "If there's any bounty posted on this Texican's topknot I could sure use it, Marshal. You know where to find me."

Hardman began systematically frisking his prisoner for concealed weapons. He drew a cattleman's skinning knife from a sheath to Mayo's belt and squinted closely at the blade.

"No bloodstains," he commented, handing the knife to Curt Randum, "but I'd say that's the weapon that stuck Slingerland. Maroney, let me see his gun. If it's been fired—"

The infantry sergeant handed over Mayo's Colt. Hardman jacked open the cylinder, ejected a spent shell, and squinted up the barrel.

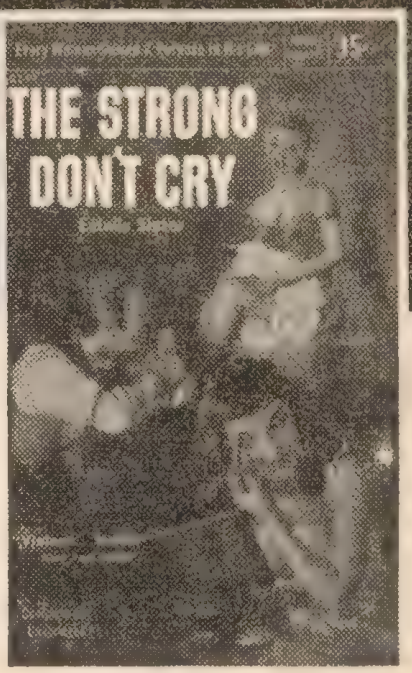
"Fresh-fouled powder. One load gone." Hardman grinned. "That's the gun that knocked over your wrangler, Randum. Mayo's as good as planted in boot hill right now."

Randum's narrowed eyes bored into Mayo's. "There's still a puzzle or two to unravel, Marshal—like what happened to my boss, Shelly Adams, and where the ten thousand in beef money is. I know for a fact Slingerland paid Shelly this morning."

[Turn to page 44]

"WHEN I MARRIED HIM I WAS DRAGGED TO HIS DEPTHS..."

My husband had big-shot ambitions. But deep-inside he was only a cheap, small-time gambler."



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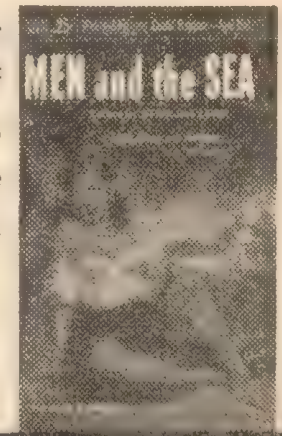

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AT THAT moment Hardman's exploring fingers located the bulge of a money belt under Mayo's shirt. Jerking open the garment, Hardman unsnapped one of the canvas compartments. The next moment he was riffling through the thick sheaf of high-denomination yellowbacks the money belt had contained.

"Ten thousand smackers, to the dollar," the Dodge City lawman said. "Mayo, it'll be right interesting hearing you explain how you came by a wad as big as this one."

Randum tossed aside Mayo's knife and made a snatching motion for the bankroll.

"I'll take that, Marshall," the Box A foreman said. "Goes without saying that's Shelly's money."

"Not so fast, Randum," Hardman said, shoving the currency into his own pocket. "We got to handle this legal-like." He turned to Mayo. "Where'd you get it, cowboy?"

Mayo spoke for the first time since the world had tumbled down on his shoulders. "I'll explain that in due time, Marshal, not now and not here."

Hardman shrugged and reached for Mayo's arm. He said to Maroney, "You're relieved of duty, Sarge. And thanks. I'll see that you get everything that's coming to you. Mayo, your old cell's waiting for you."

Maroney said, "How about his gear? Want me to fetch it along?"

Hardman nodded. "Yeah. And you, Randum, rattle your hocks over to the Prairie Furniture Store. The coroner's office and undertaking parlors are in the rear. Notify Doc Obercrumbie to pick up the dead ones upstairs."

It seemed an eternity before Steve Mayo reached the Dodge City jail and was once more back in a cell.

"All right, Marshal," he said wearily, "now I'll talk. Miss Adams gave me that ten thousand for safekeeping."

Hardman grinned skeptically. "Why should she do that? You're nothing but a saddle bum who got kicked off a Santa Fe train two days ago."

Mayo said doggedly, "You'll find Miss Adams in Room Seventeen over at the Buffalo. Tell her what's happened to me. Bring her over here. We've got a few things to tell you, Marshal."

Hardman looked startled. "*'Sta bueno,*" he said finally.

As the marshal was heading for his office, Mayo tossed caution to the winds and called after him. "While you're at it, pick up Curt Randum. I got a hunch, the way things have broken today, he might get a notion to leave Dodge City."

The slam of the iron bullpen door was Hardman's answer.

More than an hour elapsed before the marshal returned. Shelly Adams was not with him. A premonition of disaster struck Mayo.

"You didn't bring Miss Adams?" he demanded, as Gabe Hardman halted in front of his cell. "You didn't talk to her even?"

The marshal scrubbed a grimy sleeve across his sweat-slick face.

"I did. Talked with her fifteen-twenty minutes. She claims this Kiowa Kid hombre knifed Slingerland, and told me what he did to her and how you shot the Kid."

"Did you pick up Randum?" Mayo asked in a strained voice.

Hardman tongued his cheek. "Funny thing about that ramrod," he said. "I checked over at the coroner's and found out Randum hadn't notified 'em to pick up Slingerland and the other dead man. Took a pasear over to the yards where the Box A's loading cattle, and found out that Randum had saddled a horse and ridden off. Now why should Randum do that?"

Mayo's heart sank. Ranum was clearing out!

"How about the ten thousand dollars?" Mayo said finally. "You're satisfied I didn't steal it from Slingerland?"

Hardman was silent for a long time. Finally he said, "I was satisfied the money belonged to Miss Adams. I gave it back to her. She gave me a receipt for it."

Mayo gripped the jail bars with damp fists. "Then let me out of here. As long as Curt Randum's on the loose Shelly Adams's life isn't worth a plugged nickel! She hired me for a bodyguard. That's why

Slingerland bailed me out of this hell hole."

HARDMAN shook his head, his jaw outthrust doggedly.

"Can't turn you loose yet, son. Not satisfied in my mind where you fit the picture. Could of been you killed that stock buyer. Plumb plain to me that girl's head over heels in love with you. She'd tell me she gave you that money to save your neck."

There wasn't any answer to a comeback like the mashal's.

"Then how about letting Shelly in to see me?"

"Not before the judge sets your hearing date, son. I have to keep you booked, no visitors."

Hardman left the cell block. An hour later the wood-chopping crew filed into the jail. The Mexican youth locked each prisoner in his respective cell. The pot-bellied hobo with the injured ankle was on the wood gang now, Mayo noticed.

Darkness came to Dodge City. How long he would be here before his trial date was set, Mayo had no way of knowing. He wondered if the marshal had told him the truth about releasing the ten thousand dollars to Shelly. He doubted it. Otherwise Hardman would not have denied the girl the privilege of visiting the jail.

At eight o'clock the night constable relieved Hardman. Through the window of his cell Steve Mayo saw the marshal head across Front Street and vanish inside a gambling hall.

Mayo was stretched out on his cot, trying to rest, when the bullpen door opened and the constable came in, cursing under his breath. Lamplight glimmering in from the front office revealed Shelly Adams at the constable's back. She had Steve Mayo's old Army revolver in her hand. The gun was at full cock and it was pressed into the constable's spine.

Mayo leaped to his feet. It was too dark in the bullpen to see what was going on, but Mayo heard the constable halt in front of his cell and insert a big key into the lock.

"Mayo, you're getting bailed out again," the constable's whisper came thickly out of the dark. "This time you better argue this hell-cat out of it."

Steve Mayo came out of the cell. He heard Shelly whisper an order to the lawman. "Back to the front office. Come on, Steve."

In the marshal's office the blind had been drawn over the street window. The front door was shut and bolted.

"We're clearing out, Steve," Shelly Adams whispered tensely. "This is the only way. That bull-headed marshal's determined to see you hang."

The constable edged gingerly away from the gun Shelly held leveled at him. Mayo moved over to the rolltop desk and opened a drawer to recover his own Colt .45 which Hardman had placed there earlier in the day.

"I had to wait until Hardman went off duty," Shelly said. "Rustle up a rope. We've got to make sure this night man doesn't give the alarm."

The docile constable stood by meekly while Mayo found a coil of rope in a closet and bound his arms and legs. The constable's own bandanna served as a gag. Mayo got the lawman into the closet and closed the door.

"Night man makes regular tours of the town's deadfalls," he said to Shelly. "Won't be long until the hounds will be on our trail."

Shelly blew out the lamp, and the two of them left the jail office and closed the door behind them.

"I've got horses saddled and waiting around the corner on Bridge Street," she said. Taking his arm, she led him into a black alley flanking the jail's wood yard. "We're heading for Texas tonight, Steve. I've had all afternoon to think this over. We can't run the risk of your getting railroaded to the gallows. Hardman's got a reputation for being a hanging marshal. He has his sights set on hanging you."

FIVE minutes later they reached a motte of scrub oaks on a side street in the direction of the river, across the Santa Fe tracks. Two horses which Shelly had purchased were waiting for them.

"Curt Randum's unaccounted for, Hardman tells me," Mayo said, helping the girl into the saddle of a leggy line-back dun gelding.

"I know. That's one reason why I thought it best to get away from Dodge any way we could. Curt knows I've got to get back to Texas one way or another. He must have spies planted in town to keep an eye on me."

Mayo swung astride the coal-black stallion Shelly had purchased for him. The contours of the flat-horned Brazos stock saddle told him instantly that this was the kak he had ridden up the Chisholm Trail.

"You picked up my stuff," he said, as they headed their horses south through the straggly outskirts of Dodge City.

He heard the girl's low laughter. "That saddle is a sort of symbol, Steve. It brought us together, me and the man I've been waiting for all my life. The marshal didn't object to my picking up your gear at the jail office."

They were fording the muddy bottoms along the Arkansas River and heading toward the Kansas border, a hundred miles away, before Mayo spoke again.

"Did Hardman turn that money over to you or impound it?" he asked.

"I have it, Steve. Dear, efficient old John! One of his memo slips was in the middle of that bundle of bills, identifying it as the Box A beef payment. The marshal couldn't hold out on me."

Mayo felt better, knowing that. He was leaving Dodge without being sure in his mind whether Gabe Hardman was honest or not.

They put their horses into a steady lope, the twinkling lights of the cowtown falling behind them on the skyline. A Santa Fe locomotive whistled mournfully far away, and coyotes bayed in answer.

"Steve," Shelly Adams said suddenly, "I didn't stock up on supplies. I was afraid one of my men would get suspicious if they saw me buying things like that. It would have tipped them off I was planning to skip out without Curt Randum."

This was bad news, but maybe it wouldn't prove serious. He had hoped to make this trek to Texas by traveling at night and holing up daytimes, knowing Curt Randum was somewhere out here waiting. He had hoped to avoid ranches, trail camps, any kind of settlement. But without food for themselves and the horses that would be impossible.

"Don't worry about it," he said confidently. "Maybe we can ride the grub line of the cattle outfits coming up the trail. Main thing is, once we reach the Oklahoma Panhandle we'll be out of Gabe Hardman's jurisdiction. If he follows us at all he'll quit at the Kansas line."

Daylight overtook them in empty country save for distant dust clouds indicating Texas herds moving north. Mayo figured they had covered fifty miles during the night. Even with fresh mounts to switch to, Mayo knew the coming day's heat would be too much for the girl.

Mayo found a sheltered barranca between sand hills, and staked out the ponies. Except for some brackish water in a canteen slung from his saddle, they had no breakfast. Mayo spread his blankets in a shady rincon for Shelly.

"I'll get my shut-eye up in that brush on the ridge," he told her. "Try to shut everything out of your mind except that we're getting to the Panhandle all right. He suddenly realized he didn't even know their destination. "Where's the Box A?"

"On the Tascosa road about ten miles south of Dalhart."

He climbed the sand hill, taking the saddle blankets with him to make Shelly think he intended to sleep. But he had climbed to the ridge crest to do lookout duty during the long day that stretched ahead. They had left a plain enough trail for a manhunt posse to read, in case Gabe Hardman's jurisdiction extended outside of Dodge City.

MAYO slept in snatches. No dust clouds showed to the north all that morning; around mid-day he saw a lone rider at a distance, and would have given a year's pay for a pair of field glasses. He breathed easier when the rider passed on south of their dry camp.

At dusk he roused Shelly, who seemed

in good fettle for the long night ride ahead of them. But the gauntness of her cheeks told him that tomorrow they would have to locate a ranch or a setllement and get grub.

Through the purple twilight they heard a rumor of horse's hoofs, somewhere behind them; not more than two riders, maybe a single rider trailing a pack animal.

"Not a posse, anyway," Mayo said, reading the fear in Shelly's eyes. "Shelly, are there any towns between here and the Strip border?"

"Only one I know of is a stage station on the Dalhart-Dodge City road. Comanche Wells, it's called."

Jogging southward from the sand hills, Mayo thought that over. It was a risky business, showing themselves at a habitation on a stage road, but it had to be done. Both of them would be near fainting from hunger by tomorrow's dawn. And their horses needed grain.

Along toward midnight they picked up the dim trace of the stage road that would bring them to Comanche Wells. The place consisted of a saloon, the Wells-Fargo station, and a jerkwater hotel and store, Shelly had said. She had stopped there en route north with the Box A trail herd two weeks before. They had another thirty-odd miles to go across the strip before coming into Texas.

Their second sunrise out of Dodge City revealed Comanche Wells less than a mile down the road. Mayo reined off the road into a patch of mesquites and prickly pear cactus.

"We camp here," he told Shelly. "I'll drift on down to the Wells, pick up supplies and a sack of oats. Wouldn't do for us to be seen riding in, in case Hardman sent a deputy down to the Kansas line to watch for us."

Steve Mayo spurred out of the mesquites onto the Dalhart road. Shimmering heat waves made the landscape blur as if seen through wet glass. Mayo's eyes ached with fatigue. Perhaps that was why he did not spot the horse and rider midway up the slope of a bald knob which formed a landmark a half mile east of the road, or the glint of dawn light on polished glass which would have told him he was under surveillance by a man with binoculars.

Riding into Comanche Wells, Mayo saw a red-and-yellow Concord standing in front of the Wells-Fargo adobe where a hostler was making a team change. A few cowponies stood hip-shot and three-footed at a rack in front of a frame building which carried a sign "Comanche Wells Trading Post."

The stage rolled out for Dodge City and its connection with the overland railroad, as the dust-grimed cowboy hitched up in front of the trading post. His nerves were on edge, and not entirely from the strain of the hundred-mile horseback journey behind him. This place was loaded with trouble; he could smell it, taste it. If Curt Randum or a low posse from Dodge knew that he and Shelly had pulled out across country without supplies, they would naturally single out this settlement to watch.

He went into a restaurant lean-to next door to a saloon and ordered breakfast. The place was deserted except for the cook who was cleaning up the dishes left by the stagecoach passengers.

Mayo felt guilty satisfying his hunger when he knew Shelly Adams was waiting out in that mesquite patch, half dead for food. When he got back to the camp with supplies he would rustle her up a snack of bait fit for a queen.

FROM the restaurant Mayo went to the Wells-Fargo station and dickered for the purchase of half a sack of oats for their horses. He borrowed a nosebag and slung it over the stallion's head, giving the horse its first feed in twenty-four hours, then made his way into the mercantile store.

He was again carrying the Box A beef receipts in his money belt, but those yellowbacks were in hundred-dollar denominations and he knew better than to flash that kind of money in the store.

To outward appearances he was a tumbleweed cowpoke heading back to Texas. Shelly had given him some gold coins, change from her purchase of the horses,

and he used one to buy a supply of bacon, canned tomatoes, coffee and flour, the usual staples any range rider would be buying.

A feeling of vast relief went through Steve Mayo as he returned to his horse. Shelly had brought him luck, even though he was heading back to Texas against his better judgment, believing as he did that the Lone Star country was hoodooed for him.

He was lashing his gunnysack load of provisions behind the cantle and moving forward to untie the nosebag from the black's muzzle when he heard a spur rowel jingle on the board walk behind him.

"Just hold it steady, Mayo."

The voice was Gabe Hardman's. Turning, arms lifting to hatbrim level, he saw the Dodge City marshal step down from the high wooden curb. Sunlight flashed on the blued barrel of a Colt held at hip level.

So Hardman had been that rider he had seen from the top of the sand hill yesterday. He had not been trying to follow their trail and lay himself wide open to a bushwhack bullet, but had made for this border settlement on the off chance that his prey would be taking the Dalhart road south.

Hardman halted an arm's length away. He reached out gingerly to relieve Mayo of his cedar-butted Peacemaker, and thrust it through the waistband of his pants. Then he produced his rusty handcuffs.

"Reckon we're riding back to Dodge, son," Hardman said. "Where's the girl?"

A knot of muscle gritted at the hinges of Mayo's jaws. After all, Hardman had a crime charged to Shelly Adams—aiding and abetting a jailbreak, throwing a gun on Dodge City's night constable. He couldn't glibly turn her over to the law.

"She's heading for Texas, Marshal. I was supposed to catch up with her, fetch her this grub. Reckon she's down in the Strip a few miles by now, out of your reach."

Hardman reached out to notch the manacles on Mayo's wrists.

"Doubt that," he said. "I was upstairs in the trading post watching you ride in. Figure you left her up the trail. More'n likely, seeing us ride by, she'll show herself, maybe shooting. I'd hate to have a woman's blood on my conscience if I were you, Mayo."

Hardman jerked the nosebag off Mayo's black and motioned for the Texan to mount. Untying the reins, the marshal handed them to Mayo. Then he took the coiled rope off Mayo's pommel and tied one end of it to the black's bridle ring.

Paying out the rope, Hardman walked over to a sorrel gelding hitched to the rack a few feet away. He dallied the trail rope around the saddlehorn, adjusted the cinch, and swung into saddle.

"Still say the Adams girl is south of the line, kid?" the marshal asked. "It's a rough business, crossing that outlaw country, even for a man. I doubt if a sweet looker like Shelly Adams would make it to Texas."

Mayo made no answer. Time enough to tell Hardman where Shelly was when they were passing the camp beside the Dodge City stage road a mile north of the Wells.

THERE was a slim chance that Shelly might be awake. She had his Army .44. Maybe she could bluff Hardman into surrendering his prisoner. If she were asleep, he'd have to let the marshal know. He couldn't leave Shelly stranded on the prairie, not knowing what had happened to him.

They hit the road north, stirrup to stirrup, Hardman riding with a Winchester balanced across his pommel, his slitted eyes surveying the hoof sign in the dusty road as they traveled along it. A hard case, this Dodge City marshal. Mayo was beginning to have a new respect for the man. You *had* to be tough to pack a star in Dodge City.

Hardman hadn't asked him about the money. Maybe he knew he didn't have to. He held all the aces here.

Mayo tried not to let the tension show on his face as they cantered abreast of the mesquites where Shelly and her horse were hidden. Suddenly Hardman reined up.

"There's where you came out on to the road this morning, from that brush, over west," the marshal said. "Yonder is where

Shelly Adams's bronc crossed the road."

Steve Mayo jerked erect in his saddle. As plain as type on a printed page, a set of hoof tracks showed on the dust where a horseman had crossed the road from east to west since the Dodge City stagecoach had passed.

That meant a rider had headed into the mesquites toward Shelly's hideout after Mayo had left for Comanche Wells.

Mayo was opening his mouth to tell Gabe Hardman that those other hoof prints didn't belong to Shelly's dun, when a gunshot breached the morning stillness. The Dodge City lawman slid from stirrups between their horses as if yanked off by a rope.

Mayo left his saddle in a rolling dive, simultaneously with the second roar of a gun. It was not Shelly's revolver; it had the heavy concussion of a saddle carbine.

The two horses shied away, leaving Mayo squatting in the road, arms shackled with steel bracelets, alongside Gabe Hardman. The marshal's hat had been knocked off by the ambush bullet and Mayo saw a gleam of white skull bone where the slug had raked his scalp.

"Steve — Steve!" Shelly's panicked scream came from back in the mesquites. "Run for it—It's Curt Randum—"

Randum's Winchester crashed from the pear thicket off to the north of the chaparral patch, and Mayo winced as he felt the air-whip of a slug across his cheek.

Stooping, Mayo got Hardman's limp form hoisted to his shoulder, and started running for a litter of weed-grown rocks cast up by the graders of the stage road. It was scant shelter from Curt Randum's carbine, but better than being caught like sitting ducks out in the open.

Winchester bullets kicked up geysers of alkali dust at Mayo's heels as he flung himself behind the rocks, rolling the unconscious marshal off his shoulders. He owed his life to Randum's hasty shooting.

He was clawing at the sixgun in the marshal's holster when Hardman opened his eyes.

"Tell the girl to lay off, kid," panted the wounded lawman. "I know when I'm licked."

Mayo could hear Randum's body crashing through the chaparral as the man hunted for another vantage point from which he could draw a bead on his targets.

"That's not Shelly Adams doing the shooting, Marshal. It's Curt Randum."

Blood was streaming down from the marshal's hair line. His lips moved weakly. "Key to the cuffs—upper left vest pocket, under my badge."

Mayo's fingers clawed clumsily into the vest pocket and drew out the little brass key. He held it in his teeth and managed to unlock the fetter from his right wrist. Then it was easy to get rid of the irons on his left arm.

"I can't see," Hardman wheezed throatily. "That bullet burn rattled my brains. Can't—help you out of this tight."

Mayo's hands were filled with guns now, Hardman's and his own Peacemaker.

"Just lie low, Marshal," Mayo whispered, and lunged to his feet.

RANDUM'S rifle cracked again, but the bullet went wide this time. A dozen strides and Mayo was diving into the cactus and scuttling on into a deep tangle of mesquites.

Through a break in the brush he caught sight of Shelly's picketed horse and, further on, Shelly herself. She was tied with a lariat to the twisted bole of a big mesquite. But Mayo saw no trace of Randum.

"I'll make a deal with you, Mayo." Randum's voice came from somewhere north of him. "I know you're toting that money of Shelly's. Toss it out toward the road and show yourself, reaching. Once I got that bankroll in my pocket the two of you are free to saddle and ride."

Mayo inched forward through the brush, careful not to shake the foliage to betray his location. Randum couldn't be more than a dozen yards away.

Something moved off to Mayo's right, and he brought his guns jerking around. But it was only Randum's horse, tugging at a picket rope at the edge of the clearing.

"No dice, Randum," Mayo said cautiously, bellied down to the ground. "You can go to hell!"

He had hoped his voice would draw a bullet, giving him a tell-tale jet of gunsmoke at which to fire. But instead he heard Randum's sardonic laughter.

"Think it over, kid. From where I squat I've got a dead bead on Shelly's shirt button. That bankroll for her life. Think it over."

Across the clearing, Shelly called out desperately, "He's not bluffing, Steve! I can see him. Let him have the money."

Despair was in Steve Mayo. "Give him the money," he muttered, "and do you think he'd let us go, Shelly? No!"

There was only one chance now. He couldn't stall for time, hoping Hardman would rally around enough to side him. Randum might get panicky and fire on Shelly.

He had to show himself, draw Randum's fire away from the girl, take his chances.

With a sharp lunge of his legs Steve Mayo broke into the opening, heading toward Shelly. Off to his right he saw sunlight glint on a swinging Winchester barrel, and as he dropped flat a spurt of flame from Randum's carbine showed over the thick, spiny lobes of a pear cactus clump.

The Winchester slug raked the slabs of muscles on Mayo's back as he dropped. He heard Randum levering his carbine, throwing a fresh cartridge into the breach. That took time, a split second of time. It was what Mayo had gambled on.

Rolling over, he lined his Colts on the prickly pear and triggered both guns in rapid succession. He was still jerking the triggers when he came to his feet and saw Randum's Winchester slide over the cactus hedge to the ground.

"He's down, Steve! You bagged him!"

He lurched forward, holding his fire, until he had a look at the red-headed Box A ramrod. He didn't need a second look to know that the coyotes would be picking Randum's bones tonight. . . .

Marshal Gabe Hardman, his head turbaned with a bandage torn from one of the spare shirts in Mayo's warsack, was astraddle his horse ready to start the long trek back to Dodge. He grinned benevolently at the man and the girl mounted alongside him, holding hands.

"Long as your dad's spread is minus a foreman, Shelly," the Dodge City lawman drawled, "you might give a thought to hiring this rannihan. I'd say he was cut the right way of the leather, from what I've seen of him."

Shelly Adams's blue eyes were sparkling as they studied Mayo's sweat-grimed face.

"I'll get around to offering him Randum's job, Marshal," she said, smiling. "That is, if he's got rid of his aversion to living in Texas."

Hardman curveted his pony around, heading north. "See you next shipping season in Dodge, kids." He chuckled. "Providing I survive the winter."

Steve Mayo laughed. "One thing I can tell you for certain, Marshal. You won't freeze to death for want of firewood in that jailhouse stove of yours."

Mayo and Shelly reined around and headed south toward Texas and the Box A down in Hartley County. Texas, Mayo was thinking, was the only place to live. He'd been born and bred there, and from here on he figured the Lone Star State was going to hold nothing but good luck for him.

RANCH FLICKER TALK

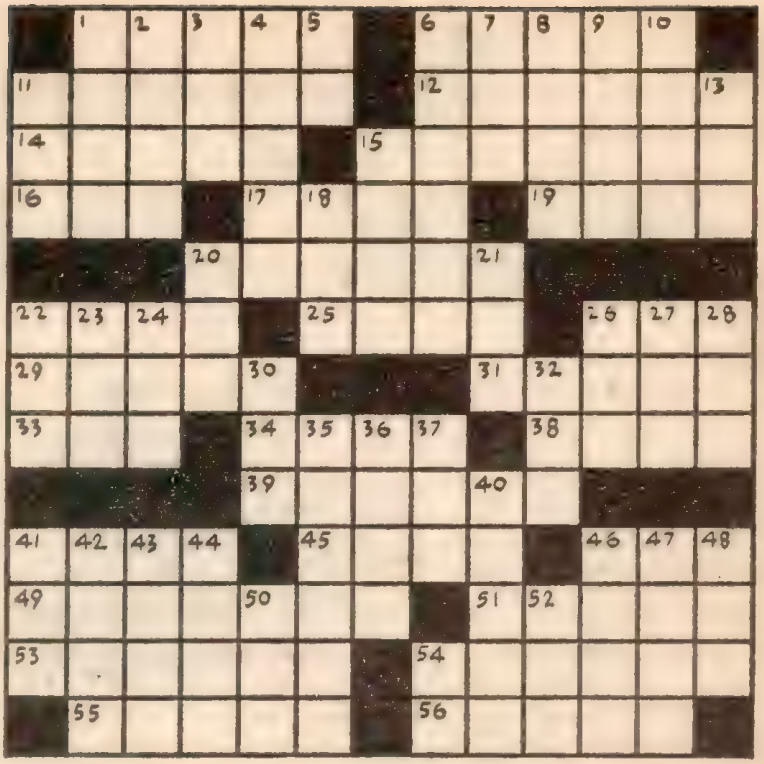
Next Issue—a Review of United Artists'

VERA CRUZ

Starring GARY COOPER and BURT LANCASTER

***Plus an Illustrated Personality Sketch of* TAB HUNTER**

THE WESTERNERS' CROSSWORD PUZZLE



The solution of this puzzle will appear in the next issue

ACROSS

1 Horse blanket
6 Cowboy garment
11 Lasso
12 To load again
14 Prepares for publication
15 Cowboy
16 England's drink
17 In comparison with
19 Killed
20 Young cow
22 Competent
25 Western plateau
26 Paddle
29 Calico horse
31 Another calico horse
33 Organ of sight
34 Friend of Andy
38 Legal paper
39 Group of saddle horses
41 Speed contest
45 Bill of fare
46 Wise old bird
49 To desert
51 Motherless calf
53 Herdsman
54 Oyster gems
55 Peevish
56 Inquired

DOWN

1 Manufactured
2 Operatic solo
3 Young insect
4 Flavor
5 Near
6 Hags
7 To chop
8 Swiss mountains
9 Pond
10 For goodness ----!
11 To allow
13 Moisture on grass
15 Restaurant
18 Masculine pronoun
20 Chicken
21 To knock
22 Monkey
23 Sea inlet
24 Falsehood
26 Half of two
27 Devoured
28 Pole
30 Thick black liquid
32 Girl's name
35 Faculty of remembering
36 Sign
37 Source of light
40 Would-be cowboys
41 College cheer
42 To encourage
43 To be concerned
44 Finishes
46 Fairy tale giant
47 Not tame
48 French article
50 Detachment (abbr.)
52 Timber tree
54 Daddy

F	A	T	■	T	H	U	M	B	■	C	A	R
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■	■	■	O	N	E	■	E	N	E	■	■	■
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Solution to puzzle in preceding issue

Beyond THE RIDGE

DAVE BONNELL KNEW what it was like to be lonely and afraid . . . and maybe that was why he had to risk his life for the widow. . . .

By Fred Grove

STREAKY gray showed in the east, and daylight came on. Dave Bonnell stirred in his thin blanket, fully awake at once and listening. He lay there, content to catch the picketed gelding's steady grass-cropping. But presently something like dread traveled through him, and he thought with a running man's misgiving of the day about to begin. He told himself he was a fool to have come back.

Unmoving, he heard the first distant thunking of the ax across the wooded valley below him, early as usual. It was a noise he had grown to listen for, a small comfort, because it broke the tense monotony of his hidden camp. True, it was an erratic sound, as if the axman struck wearily or rested often; yet it was a friendly sound in this watchful world of his. And sometimes on the lifting wind he smelled wood smoke, smoke that made the juices in his mouth run fast.

An insistent hunger was working inside him, and he threw back the blanket. After some moments he stretched his long legs and ploughed finger through his coarse black hair. When he stood up stiffly, a tall man drawn to to the lean of his big-

"My husband," she said, "is nearby. Now, you ride on!"

boned frame, he sent a sober glance toward his dwindling little mound of supplies. Although deer ran in the thickets, he hadn't dared a meat shot. Now, could he risk one more fire? Only yesterday he had spotted bunched riders in the distance, and they were not moving cattle.

For a long time he stood rooted, rubbing his stubbled jaw. Then, in a rush of desire, his hunger won and he made a tiny blaze under the overhanging rock by the seep spring. Even after he'd wolfed down the meager breakfast and carefully kicked out the coals, he was still empty. No man, he knew, could keep this up long.

At that moment the thudding of the ax started up again, and he thought of the cabin. Another broad-backed homesteader, he guessed, green to the frontier, staking his future in this cheap, rich land which had been open range for the big outfits until a year or more ago. In an hour, Dave considered, he could ride down there, buy something and get back.

He was edging toward the bay horse as he mulled it over. With the picket rope in hand he stopped short, thinking, I've got to; a man's got to eat. That decided

him. Deliberately he saddled up and rode out of the pocket-sized clearing into the timber. Before leaving it, farther on along the ridge, he halted and gazed sharply around and beyond. His eyes met a broken, rolling vastness in which nothing stirred among the round-topped hills.

The emptiness satisfied him and he went ahead, but already the old tight rein of caution held him. His face had a pulled-in feeling, and he wondered if his eyes showed the hunted feeling that had become a part of him in these few days. It was a face normally smooth and untroubled, now grown tight and hollow-eyed.

ALL this trailed back to the town of Crossroads farther north, to gambler Gib Hambrick falling under the table in the rear of the Drover's House and the acrid smell of blooming powder smoke from the gun in his own knotted hand. Hambrick's bullet had been high and wide. Dave knew the game had been rigged against him and Barney Struck. But that made it no easier for him, for he had shot a man.

There had been the pell-mell ride out of town, with grim Ben Pickett, the federal marshal, hard on their heels. Pickett stuck like a burr until the rough country rose and swallowed them. They bought a few supplies from a nester and rode south for two days. When Barney decided on Texas, Dave had turned back.

Now he became aware of the horse's fidgeting, and he realized he'd been locked in thought again. Instead of dropping down the steep valley trail, he rode west until the uncertain whacking of the ax pinched off, until the high-shouldered hills flattened out to a sea of weaving grass, spring green. Afterward he cut a wide half-circle, entered the valley's far end, and crossed Lonesome Creek. All of it was familiar country, so rough as to be shunned by most, which was the reason he had returned to it.

Before him the cabin took shape as a square bulk, hunkered low in the tall timber. Riding closer, he noticed the grayed ends of the notched logs, which told him the cabin's owner was no newcomer. The running walk of the gelding made a rhythmic patter, suddenly loud and carrying in the hacked-out clearing. There was no movement around the place.

Uneasiness touched him and he reined up. He stared at the feeble pole corral enclosing two bony mules and, drawn up under the trees a weathered spring wagon which had cast a tire. The almost-bare woodpile meant either a lazy man or an absent one. There was a low shed, and its pen had the bars down. Beyond the cabin was a half-grown stand of corn and a struggling garden.

"What d'you want?"

Dave jerked and felt himself flushing. He'd been caught gawking. A woman stood at the cabin's far corner. She held a shotgun uncertainly, as if she had grabbed it up on hearing the sound of his horse.

He touched his floppy hat brim. "Just passing through, ma'am," he said. "I'm low on flour. Can you spare some?"

She tilted her dark head toward the east. "Logan City's ten miles straight over that hill yonder," she told him, making the invitation quite plain.

He saw the fear show like a shadow falling across her face, and tenseness of her body, but her tone was level and cool. She was dressed in some kind of loose-fitting gray, the sleeves rolled up to her elbows. Her face was slightly browned and rounded, the full mouth compressed.

"I will pay for the flour." As he spoke, even without insistence, he realized he'd said it wrong.

Suspicion darkened her gray eyes; they told him frankly how rough he must look. She seemed to take a long breath as she pointed the shotgun directly at him. "My husband," she said, after a moment's hesitation, "is nearby. Now, you ride on!"

The abruptness of her fury straightened him. "Sorry, ma'am," he answered, his surprise growing. "No trouble intended." He was reining away when a boy ran from around the cabin to her. Winded and excited, he gave a croupy cough, and Dave noticed his pale, sickly color and felt a sudden pang of regret. He was not more than five or six, with the same large ex-

pressive gray eyes as the woman's.

His attention went at once to Dave's bay, to Dave's scarred boots and battered hat, the black gunbelt and the holstered saddle gun. In his small boy's expression, wrapped in a sort of dreaming, all Dave's worn gear appeared to take on a wide-eyed magnificence.

"Mama—cowboy!" the boy exclaimed, taking a step closer.

She said sharply, "Jimmy, come here." Jerking the boy to her, she swung on Dave. "You get, and don't come back!"

TIGHT-LIPPED, he swung the horse back the way he'd ridden in. Angling into the cool woods, he kept thinking of the woman's violent distrust. It was really closer to fear than anything else—the fear of a lonely woman left with a sickly kid. As an afterthought he wondered if she'd been bluffing. And then, seeing again the determined thrust of her rounded face, he decided she wasn't.

Riding on, Dave did not notice the brown shape until brush cracked and the bay horse jumped. A milk cow lifted its motley head, one horn broken.

Dave scanned the thick underbrush, half expecting to see a man following afoot, homesteader style. When nobody appeared after a minute, he moved on. Still the cow lingered, showing no intention of going home, and suddenly Dave found himself remembering the pale-looking boy, maybe a little hungry himself. And there was the small chance, with the cow brought in, that the woman might relent and sell him the flour. Also a chance, he thought wryly, that she might use the shotgun when she saw him coming after ordering him off the place.

Reluctantly, he reined and rode straight for the cow. Her head came up and she lumbered a few paces, then stopped to resume her stubborn grazing. When he urged her forward again she cut back quickly in the opposite direction. But the bay, liking this old cutting-horse game, instinctively wheeled and headed her. So the cow went a short distance and quit. They moved like that toward the clearing, the cow traveling grudgingly only when Dave pressed in from behind, stopping when he did not.

Dave had his doubts as they made a racket breaking through the brush, loud enough to bring the woman to the door with the boy at her side. She looked straight and formidable with the shotgun in her hands. But her expression showed only relief, mingled with annoyance. She crossed to the milking pen and raised the bars so the cow could enter.

"Guess your husband missed her in the timber," Dave said. "A cowbell would help."

She said nothing and he turned his horse, feeling his defeat. He had reached the clearing's edge when her even voice came to him.

"Thank you." she said.

Yet, upon bringing his glance around, he saw that her eyes held same cool distance as before, and the shotgun did not waver. For an instant, as if not quite sure he ought to, the boy gave him a brief wave.

SHADOWS banked in along the rock ledge, a black curtain behind which the night insects hummed. Dave made pan bread from the last of his flour, then fried bacon and boiled coffee, while he ironed out the decision in his mind. He had to move on, the necessity forced when the woman had refused him flour two days back.

Memory of it stirred his resentment, though faintly, because he could not rightfully blame her. Rough men rode the territory trails these days, most of them like him, running from something. And now that he faced it he understood why he had hung on, why he hadn't footed on with Barney Struck to Texas, where a man could lose himself forever.

He had to know whether Hambrick lived or had died. Recalling the shooting, Dave figured his bullet had struck high, near the left shoulder. Yet, when in his mind's eye he saw again the man's slack face, he wondered dismally if the shot had entered lower.

After daybreak, he ate breakfast and kicked out the coals of his campfire. On impulse he walked to the low ridge overlooking the valley. It was not time for the chopping sound. He studied the valley, cottony with early haze, and judged where the cabin would be, under its screen of trees. As he watched, delaying his saddling, horsemen bulked below him.

For a moment of white panic David stood still. Then hurriedly, he flattened out. And he had a sudden knowing, a feeling that comes from hiding, that these men wanted him. He sensed it in the deliberate way they rode, in the searching stares they cast on the rising hills, in the sun flashes on short carbine barrels.

Out in front rode a loose-shouldered man, and even at this distance Dave recognized him. Ben Pickett was so rangy and raw-boned that he loomed a head taller than his companions. And on this man Dave kept his eyes, because Pickett was always the swinging point of a manhunt.

The riders reined to a tight palavering clump—all but Pickett, who held back, his gaze always busy around him. Only when a posseman gestured westward impatiently did the marshal join them. His wide-brimmed hat bobbed as he talked. There was no more gesturing. In a moment they swung north and put their mounts to the sloping, rocky trail.

Dave's mouth was dry. He watched them come on, feeling the trembling quakiness in his stomach. He had slipped out his pistol, but did not remember reaching for it. Now the posse was so close below him, strung out single file, that he could see Pickett's drooping mustaches. Realization was a wave rolling and flooding his mind, telling him that they had passed the cabin. Had the woman told them?

But the thought spun away and his attention was pinned again on Pickett, who had halted in front. He was taking a long time for his look-see, Dave knew. With the interest of a cat-eyed man he must be seeing things that escaped ordinary men. Dread grew on Dave, and the waiting became worse. A turn to the right now, off the seldom-used trail and along the high ground of the ridge, would expose his camping place.

He drew in his breath, expelled it slowly when Pickett touched spurs and went on over the hill. Raw relief warmed Dave and he waited a long time, long after the distant ring of shod hoofs on loose rock had run out. Not until then did he push up and flex his stiff muscles.

As he straightened, the far-off thudding of ax against wood came clearly, broken in rhythm. He thought of the woman and the boy, but dismissed the image for another of Texas to the south and west.

Soon afterward he left the camp and jogged west, looking carefully, intending to avoid the valley. He passed through the last of the timber, and the open spaces seemed to beckon and wave him onward. Ahead of him grazed a lone cow. He scarcely paid it notice at first. Approaching it, however, he felt first a beginning recognition and next a twinge of annoyance.

THERE was no mistaking the motley head and the broken horn. It was the woman's stubborn cow, wandered from the valley for this rich grass. She was like a human, almost, figuring it to be better over the ridge and where she hadn't been before.

Irritation piled up in Dave, a disgust for homesteaders who knew nothing about keeping up stock. The woman, in his judgment, would not think to search this far. She couldn't, with the boy at her heels. Dave disregarded the man, because a man who did not bell a cow in rough country was a poor stockman.

Haste urged him on. Yet, even as he circled the cow, turning her, he knew that he was risking a chance if the posse came back.

An hour later he saw the cabin, and the woman was out in front. She dropped the ax at once and took up the shotgun leaning against the cabin wall.

As the cow ambled past her into the pen the woman said, "She broke out last night."

Uncomfortable before the shotgun, Dave said with an attempt at good humor, "You can put that down. I'm traveling."

"You were passing through the other day. She put a certain emphasis on the "passing" and there was skepticism in her tone, and distrust. She apeared drawn, which gave Dave the impression that she had an inner concern, detached and apart from him. "All kinds of men ride by here. Today there was a posse. Mr. Pickett, the federal marshal, has set up headquarters at Logan City. He's looking for a man." Her eyes, changing expression, searched his face briefly.

"Country's full of rough men," agreed Dave, and he smiled down at her, seeking to give her the confidence he thought she needed. "Good thing your husband—"

From inside the cabin came a boy's cough, drawn-out and ragged. Like a flash the woman turned. She hurried inside, and Dave heard her talking, her voice soothing. When she returned to the door worry etched tiny lines around the corners of her eyes. But she still held the gun on him.

"You got a sick boy?" asked Dave.

She barely nodded and he saw the fixed expression, deep in the eyes, like a fear she was trying to hide before a stranger. Dave's roaming glance settled on the woodpile. As usual, it looked scant.

A puzzled anger stirred in him, and he forced down the desire to ask about her husband. Instead he said, "I'm in no big hurry, and you need wood." Hardly aware of his intent, he swung down and tramped across to the woodpile. There was a chopping block and little else.

"I will cut my own wood," she told him, a ring of pride in her voice.

"Ma'am," he said, "this stuff wouldn't make fire for coffee." His impatience grew, and he picked up the ax and went forward in his cowman's choppy gait to the timber. Searching, he found a short oak sapling and slashed it down. He dragged it back to the yard, threw it across the chopping block and began swinging. His gunbelt felt cumbersome, and after a while he unbuckled it and laid it aside. When he had cut the sapling into stove lengths, he gathered up the short chunks and faced her. "I'll take this in," he said, waiting.

She hesitated, her eyes reading him again. "All right," she said.

He walked past her into the cabin. He saw the wood box by the black stove and dropped his load. At the noisy thumping he made, he remembered the boy and turned. The boy lay on a crude bunk, flush-faced and hollowy-eyed, covered with quilts.

"Guess I woke you up," Dave said regretfully.

The boy managed a faint grin, but he shook his head weakly. His round eyes centered on Dave, interested and puzzled. "Your six-shooter—where is it?" There was no strength in the voice, only a strained and ragged huskiness.

"Why," said Dave, "I left it outside." He

Love's Spell

By SAPELLOW SAM

I meant to say her eyes were "starry"—
I fear we'll never marry,
For in my billet-doux, I'm sorry
To say, I spelled it "starey"!

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was suddenly awkward before the sick boy, with nothing helpful to say.

DAVE saw the woman soberly watching the young face. The boy coughed again, the sound coming from deep down, and she touched his forehead. Standing there, Dave was conscious of a stranger's clumsiness. He shifted in his boots and glanced around the neat room. There was a double bunk, a cupboard, a rough table and some chairs. All at once he was struck by the bareness, bare even for this rough land where luxuries were few, and he felt a shameful regret about asking for the flour.

"Well," he said, "I'll get along now."

Almost mechanically she answered, "I'm obliged to you." But she still held the shotgun and her eyes were straight on him.

The boy stirred uneasily, his eyes on Dave, and Dave gave him a grin and went outside. Buckling on the gunbelt, he snapped a look back at her in the doorway, arrested by a sudden thought. "There's a doctor in Logan City. Your husband—" He did not finish.

Although he could not tell for certain, he thought her mouth trembled slightly. She was on the verge of telling him something. Then slowly, she straightened her slim shoulders, and her dark head came up. "Jimmy's a little better this morning," she said. Her tone lacked conviction.

He did not press the question, and her eyes told him nothing. He was silently reminding himself that this was none of his worry and in another hour he'd be traveling open country. Somehow, though, try as he might, he wasn't thinking so much about Texas. His mind was a free thing over which he had no control, which drifted back to what he'd seen in the cabin—its overwhelming impression of hard times, the sick boy, and the man always gone when needed. An old story, Dave realized, his cowman's contempt rising. Homesteaders pushed out to the frontier's edge, unprepared for the land's demands. Many of them were good dirt farmers, but many were unequal to the task and poor providers.

His protest growing, he walked quickly to the gelding and jerked the carbine from the boot. As he heeled around she demanded suspiciously, "What're you doing?"

"Going hunting. Still plenty of time to ride."

"There's no call for you—" she began.

He was gone into the dark timber before she could finish. In the late afternoon he returned, bent forward under a young buck slung over his shoulder. His luck had held. He had bagged the deer with only one shot, and the angle tricky. And he'd waited long after the echo thinned out before he went over. Coming back, he'd stayed to the woods as best he could. In him now he could feel the haste hammering for him to ride on.

Grunting wearily, he dropped the deer. It made a racket that brought her to the door. "How's the boy?" he asked quietly, and as he spoke he heard the broken cough inside. He noticed that her hands were empty.

"I—I don't know." Her gaze slid away from him, returned when he drew a handful of stubby roots from his pocket.

She stared down. "What's that?"

"Red root," he said. "You boil it. Makes a strong tea with sugar. Might help him, loosen him up inside."

Urgency threaded all through him as she took the roots inside, for he knew it was past time to go. He had lingered here long enough, maybe too long. Quickly, he cleaned and quartered the venison and hung it in the fork of a tree, wrapped in his yellow saddle slicker. He was washing up at the bench outside the cabin, frowning over the labored coughing of the boy, when he heard the abrupt rush of her feet across the floor. She apeared suddenly in the doorway and he knew without asking.

"He's—he's worse," she said and covered her face with her hands.

Dave ducked inside the low-roofed room, his glance narrowing on the bunk. The boy looked even paler than he had a few hours before. His eyes were closed and Dave could hear his tortured breathing plainly. Fear hit him like a blow as he turned away, dogged by the sense of

wrongness about this place, this family, by a feeling that he ought not leave.

He took her arm, led her outside. "Look here, ma'am," Dave said gravely, "you mentioned your husband. Can't he go in town for a doctor? He can get Doc Harvey, I know. And he's good with kids."

Her eyes avoided his and he went on, surprised when he heard the roughness of his voice. "Where is he?"

SHE had been quietly crying. But in a moment she looked up, and he could feel the strong pride bracing her. Her eyes seemed to bore right through him, fighting an inner, silent struggle. It came to him that he still gripped her arm, so he dropped his hand.

"My husband," she said in an odd, squeezed-out voice, "died a year ago." And this, he recognized, was what she'd been holding back. "We came out here from Missouri. Land was high back home and he said we'd have a better chance in the Territory. He always figured a homestead would be something for Jimmy when he grew up. Well, I'm Jessie Overby—" there was the faintest break in her voice—"and I've tried to work the place. But I'm afraid I'm not much of a farmer."

For long moments, Dave stood with lowered head, a hard-muscled man turned awkward and stiff and not knowing what to say next. Finally he said, "You've got neighbors?" He knew—and damned it—that his hope climbed like a signal on his face.

It drifted away as she shook her head, uncertain again. "Nobody close. Dry weather burned most folks out last year. One family still lives five-six miles west. But nobody I know. We've stuck close."

Dave considered this impassively, figuring the distance west and back. Too great now. Logan City to the east. If he found a homesteader, likely it'd be one with a slow-footed horse. His thoughts circled again, came back and settled. He pulled in a long breath, and a soberness caught him. There was a gap of silence, running on, so still that he could hear her breathing close beside him.

Realization flicked distantly, formed with a surprising clarity, solid and sure, as it marched across his mind. It had been there all the time. In a voice so low and strange that it seemed to come from a great distance, he said, "The bay horse can travel."

Her eyes widened, searching his face, as if seeing him fully for the first time—his sun-burned features dark as an Indian's, the lean frame, the worn shirt and levis and the scuffed boots.

Without a word, he left her and mounted. Reining around, he took one backward glance. She hadn't moved. Her eyes met his. "You know the way?" she asked.

"Yes, ma'am. I know Logan City."

Then he touched spurs and the lazy shoulder muscles were bunching under him. He wondered why she hadn't come right out and asked him to go. And on the heels of that he guessed he understood why: it was her pride, the same stubborn pride that had kept her here when the others around her had packed up.

Eastward the land rose and fell, dark timber and high hills and patches of prairie; up-and-down country with rocky ridges. He found a faint trail and rode hard along it until the bay slackened, so Dave eased up and let the gelding blow. Presently they ran on again, pounding a trail that grew wider, and gradually the roughness smoothed out of the land and they followed a wagon road.

It was early evening when he sighted Logan City, a cluster of yellow lights blinking like fireflies on the flat prairie.

Caution ran through him, cool as the lifting wind, as he entered the street, quiet at this hour. He tied up at the first hitching post and went forward afoot. He kept looking for Ben Pickett's tall figure. Doc Harvey's office and sleeping quarters, he remembered, were over Duren's Saddle Shop in the center of town. He found it and quietly climbed the narrow stairs.

THERE was no light under the door. But Harvey, a busy man, slept whenever he could. Dave pounded loudly, again and again. After a time he came down to the street, all his dread rising.

A man tramped by on the plank walk. From deep in the shadows Dave asked, "Where's Doc Harvey tonight?"

"Over at Mills's store, talking politics as usual," came the answer. The townsman turned curiously before going on.

Reluctance filled Dave, a holding back. He forced himself down the street, trying to appear casual. Light burned in Mills's general store and Dave paused and looked in. Harvey, his back turned, stood talking while Frank Mills, who was closing for the night, tallied his books. Harvey's black medicine bag lay on the counter.

There was a coolness along Dave's neck as he stepped inside. He was coming up behind Harvey when Mills, a stout, puffy man of middle age with nervous hands, glanced up irritably over square-lensed glasses. Recognition flared across his round face. He swallowed in surprise and Dave saw the instant fear. Doc Harvey had caught the expression and turned.

"Doc," said Dave, rougher than he intended, "a homesteader's kid's sick out on Lonesome Creek. Pneumonia, maybe. Come on."

Instinctively Harvey reached for the bag. Then he hesitated and drew back, all at once thoughtful. "Well, Dave," he said. A kind of curious speculation kindled the tired eyes, not the jumpy fear that shone in Mills' face. He was an overly lank man, pale and unkempt and slow-moving, his face set in a perpetually patient look.

"Come on!" Dave's voice rang with impatience. "It's a rough country. I'll have to show you."

Doc Harvey nodded wearily, and the haggardness crept across his cheeks again. He straightened as if to go.

"No, Doc." Mills had pushed back from the counter, both plump hands braced against it. His small black eyes bulged, and he flung his suspicion at Harvey. "Don't you see it? Barney Struck's out there in the hills, shot up. This is for him. There's no kid!

Sickness came over Dave, a feeling of lost time. He said hoarsely, "Stay out of this."

He thought he'd won then, just for a moment, because Harvey picked up the bag and Mills seemed to freeze. But the thing Dave had feared broke before him in a wild and crazy swiftness. Mills bent and dug under the counter, then his hand came whipping up. With the shine of the pistol a dim flicker in his eyes, Dave lunged and struck Mills along the jaw. The sound was flat and powerful in the room. Mills's head rolled; he lost the gun and fell backward on the floor. He fell heavily and did not get up.

Dave heaved around with his own pistol swinging, expecting anything.

Doc Harvey's face was unreadable. "I guess," he said, "it was hit or be shot. Nevertheless, I don't like this. Now where's Struck?" He was not a big man physically, yet in that moment he seemed to grow larger. His gaze held level, unwavering; it demanded the truth.

"In Texas," said Dave, and deliberately holstered his pistol.

After a moment Harvey growled, "All right. Of course, I'd go even if it were Struck, y'understand, but I won't have you lying to me. If Pickett sees you . . ." He left it unfinished. Already he was striding for the door.

They stepped outside into the streaky dark of the street, where scattered horsemen jogged past. At a fast walk they reached the livery stable. Harvey called for two fresh horses. Mounted up, Dave thought with regret of the bay left behind. It was a better horse, he judged, than the one he rode.

They heard the first shout, hoarse on the wind, as they loped out of town. Heading into the darkness, Dave understood dismally how it all must look: Dave Bonnell, who had shot one man, had beaten Frank Mills and kidnaped Doc Harvey to doctor his pard.

He shivered, not from coldness but because there seemed no way out of this. Once, when they pulled up to listen, he asked Doc Harvey, "Is Gib Hambrick still alive?"

"Just came in tonight. Been fighting measles the last two days down at the railroad camp."

FAINT hoofbeats sounded behind them, coming as a far-off roll of drums. They came closer and Dave went angling off the trail. He knew this country as only a man could who had combed cattle from the scrubby timber and the long-running hills. They rode by sense, by feel, until finally Dave said, "Over there." He'd have found the cabin, he thought, even without the light.

In the yard, Doc Harvey dismounted heavily and tramped to the door. Jessie Overby waited there, and Dave saw where she had nail-hooked a lantern for them. As Harvey hurried inside, Dave saw her turn with him, the light pale on her face. A fine-looking woman, he thought, and mighty brave. Then he tied the horses and stood outside a moment, reluctant to go, afraid of what he might see. But he forced the feeling down and made himself enter.

There was a coal oil lamp burning. Doc Harvey turned from the bunk, his low voice matter-of-fact. "Dave . . . a good fire . . . hot water." Jessie Overby's eyes never strayed from the bunk. Her face told Dave that her entire life lay there before her.

Dave moved, and it was pure relief no longer to be standing still with his mind numb, feeling helpless. He cut shavings and started a fire from the short saplings left in the woodbox. Afterward he took the lantern and ax and prowled the timber, and came back with all the wood he could drag. This he cut with long, powerful strokes, until he had an armful. When he carried it to the cabin Harvey and Jessie Overby had not stirred from the bunk. Dave returned to the woodpile. He drove the axe savagely, as if by doing so he could smash the quiet terror inside the still cabin.

Long afterward, he went dead-footed to the doorway. The moment he slumped down to rest, it swarmed over him—all the hard riding and stomach emptiness and punishing pressures of this night and the nights and the days before. He heard voices murmuring from the other side of that distant world where Doc Harvey waged his patient fight.

Dave glanced up at the sky and saw it was near light, brushing daybreak. He was suddenly startled, for he'd dozed off. His mind whipped the warning at him: ride while you can. Somewhere in the slow-breaking light, in the timber and brush, a posse prowled. He stood up and felt the ache tight in his shoulders and arms. What if he left now? Could he ride away and never know about the boy? Why, he thought, it was like needing to know about Hambrick, the gambler, only stronger.

Sound, so faint he hardly noticed it at first, drifted out of the smoky grayness blanketing the clearing. Old danger signals came bristling. Dave felt the knot in the pit of his stomach. Voices grew in the cabin.

"Dave," Doc Harvey stood close behind him, and abruptly Dave was fearful of what the doctor had to say. He half turned, his attention reaching out to the padding sound in the timber.

"Dave," Doc Harvey said, voice strong.

Dave's mouth turned dry. He hated to face Doc Harvey and he couldn't take his eyes off the timber. He started to speak, but he never got it out.

Horses filled the clearing in violent motion, striking across it toward the cabin, and he sensed that he was too late as he straightened and faced them. Now riders bunched before him. His hand brushed his holster, then dropped away. He just stood there, wondering why he made no effort to lift his pistol.

"Come out, Bonnell!" It was a high man on a swerving horse.

ARMS loose and hanging, Dave stepped slowly out. Riders closed in at once, while others slammed in behind the cabin. He thought, they figure Barney's running out the back. He looked up into the shifting muzzles of carbines and pistols. The tall man loomed over him. He recognized grim Ben Pickett, hard as nails, drooping mustaches making his iron-jaw face still sharper. Pickett split his hard gaze between Dave and the cabin. "Barney Struck in there?" he demanded.

An overwhelming weariness hit Dave and he shook his head. He knew Pickett didn't believe him.

It was Doc Harvey who spoke up next, talking as he walked forward, his manner severe. "Pickett," he said curtly. "you're kicking up a pack of noise with a sick boy inside. Struck isn't here—never has been. Dave didn't have to ride in town to get me, but he did. Y'understand that? And Mills, the meddling fool, almost stopped him." Then Doc Harvey completely ignored the marshal and the possemen. "As I was about to say, Dave, when they came up—give me your six-shooter. Orders from the sick room. We got a patient on the mend and I never like to disappoint a boy."

The lifting meaning traveled through Dave suddenly, like summer heat lightning. He unbuckled the gunbelt, handed it over, and faced Pickett with the question leaping in his mind. "Hambrick," he said. "What about him?"

The marshal blew on his thorny mustaches. "Gib Hambrick," he began, and paused, "will live to be ninety if he quits cards. Frank Mills has a sore head. It's my opinion that a man ought to leave regulating to the proper authorities." His voice lacked its usual bite as he finished, "But we'll have to take you in."

It was time to go. Dave wondered if a man never stopped riding. He was up and mounted when he noticed Jessie Overby standing in the doorway. He guessed she'd heard it all.

He glanced uneasily at Pickett, who still dallied, held by the same sight. She was, Dave decided, a woman of strong mind, and yet she could be pliant or stormy, all a man hoped for.

Then she moved, not away from him but almost running across the yard. In a moment she stood at his stirrup. She seemed years younger, her face rounded and with an expression he'd never seen there before. He wondered if his admiration showed and he didn't care, for he wanted her to see it.

"This is our man, Dave Bonnell," Ben Pickett said, though not seeming proud of it. He went on curiously, "Mrs. Overby, you didn't tell us he was around the other day, when we stopped here."

She looked long at Pickett. "He wasn't here." Yet there was no defiance in her voice, just the gentleness of a woman, often alone, who maybe noticed things a man never saw even in himself.

Grim Ben Pickett made no answer. But he did a gallant thing. He touched hand to hat brim in salute.

Then she turned and Dave saw her eyes, squarely upon him, silently thanking him. "That's why I couldn't ask you to go in town," she told him. "I knew what it meant, But I guess I knew you would go. Dave, you'll come back, after all this is over."

Dave Bonnell nodded. It was the most certain thing of his life, and he was still hearing the magic of his name as she spoke it. She had said that he would come back and he knew it as sure to come, something deep down telling him so. Now, riding off with the others at Pickett's gruff command, he decided that was more than enough to carry a man through the days ahead, whatever they held for him. It was good to think about.

Coming up in the next issue

Gun Job

An ex-convict can't risk any trouble . . . even to help a friend

A Magazine-Length Novel

By J. L. BOUMA

Bride of Treachery

Two men wanted Edith . . . and life or death hung on her decision

A Western Novelette

By HERBERT D. KASTLE

OLD WEST WELCOME

By PHIL SQUIRES

Upon the oldtime ranches there was always table space
For any cowboy stranger dropping in.
They never tried to judge him by the whiskers on his face,
Nor made him state his attitude toward sin.

They set him down to share their chuck, they gave his horse a feed.
What brought him there they didn't ask to know.
They just showed hospitality in every word and deed.
They never asked him when he aimed to go.

To make the stranger welcome was a custom of the land
In which all cowfolk took an honest pride,
But this here obligation, you must also understand,
Implied a few things from the other side.

Suppose the stranger chose to stay one night or maybe two,
A week, a month—such time as he was there,
He pitched right in on any work his ranch host had to do,
And nearly always tried to do his share.

He might not be a cowhand of the rangeland's very best,
But if he showed he wasn't scared of sweat,
Nobody took exception to his staying as a guest,
Nor grudged him any vittles that he et.

Sometimes a stranger cowboy only aimed to stay the night
To rest himself and horse while drifting through,
But found the boss could use a hand, he liked the work all right,
So wound up riding there a year or two.

The oldtime western cowfolk never shut a stranger out
In summer's balm or blizzard's wintry storm.
Their ways was rough, their gizzards tough, but don't you never doubt—
This world has known few hearts that was as warm!

PART ONE

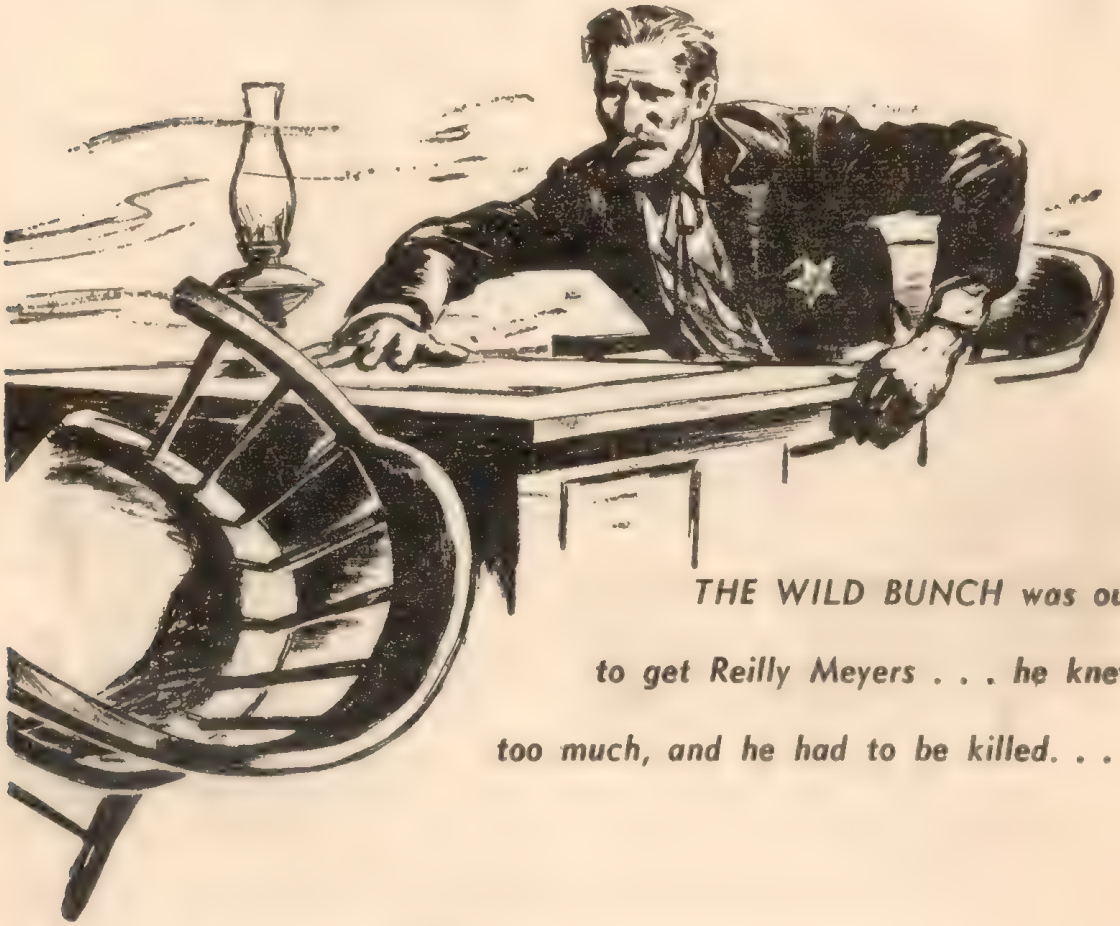
BUCKEYE sprawled along the southern tip of Duck Lake and, although bracketed on three sides by mountains, the town itself reared up from the desert flatness, a monument to hurry and unconcern.

Riding down a main street that was little more than a strip of dust flanked by boardwalks and building overhangs, Reilly Meyers found that little had changed during his absence. Selecting a shaded spot by the hardware store, he dismounted and tied his horse. He was a solid man, blunt-faced, and the dust of many weary miles clung to his clothes.

When he swung his head to look up and down the street he was a man fine-drawn by the habits of his life, careful now and, in a way, dangerous. He carried a rifle, a brass-receivered Winchester .44, and in his waistband a

Bullet Range

by DAN RIORDAN



THE WILD BUNCH was out to get Reilly Meyers . . . he knew too much, and he had to be killed. . . .

short-barreled Remington had been thrust, the butt within easy reach.

A few doors down three horses stood by the tie-rail, switching flies. A rig was parked by the feed store and a half-dozen men cruised the walks. Near the edge of town a blacksmith's hammer tolled like a church bell.

With his hat brim shielding his eyes, Reilly sauntered down the street, drawing no more than a casual glance from anyone, and this was the way he wanted it.

At the far corner he turned, walking on until he came to an alley. Traveling the length of it, he stopped when he came to the rear of a small bakery. The spicy smell of bread and pastries was thick and inviting when he opened the back door and stepped inside.

In the front of the building a young woman was wait-

ing on a customer, but she was shielded from his view by a wall separating the rooms. The bell on the cash drawer tinkled musically, and a moment later the front door opened and closed. Reilly leaned his Winchester against a baker's bench and waited for the girl to come into the back room.

"Just put the flour on the floor, Tommy," she called, and when she received no answer, came to the archway.

She halted suddenly when she saw Reilly Meyers, her mouth opening in surprise. Then she dashed across the distance between and threw her arms around his neck, kissing him soundly.

"Hey!" Reilly said, the severity of his face breaking. He put her away from him slightly. "Where did you learn to do that?"

She laughed, a happy, easy sound, and cocked her head to one side, studying him. "You look older," she said. "I think I like you better this way, a little more serious and not so full of the devil."

TESS ISHAM was a small girl, but she had an hour-glass figure with the sand settled in the right places. Her hair was pale brown with definite reddish tints in it. Her eyes were almost green and a peppering of freckles covered the bridge of her nose and her cheekbones.

"Where's your loving sister, Tess, the one who was going to wait for me? Reilly's voice was soft, but tight with suppressed anger.

Tess Isham's eyebrows drew down and she placed a hand flat against Reilly's chest. "Damn," she said, exasperated, "how did you find out about it?"

"I met Max Horgan on the way in. He said she married Burk Seever."

Tess studied him carefully. "Reilly, it's done. Let it go."

"Why did she? Tell me that."

The small bell over the front door rang and she said, "Customer. Wait here for me."

"Sure," he said and watched the switch of her hips as she went into the other room.

The low run of voices filtered into the back room, but he paid no attention to it. Leaning against a bench, he looked at the long baking ovens, the hanging pots and utensils. The bare floor had been scrubbed so often that the grain of the wood was upraised ridges. He had scrubbed this floor himself when Sally Isham had been here, because he had been a crazy cowpuncher in love and had wanted to be with her, even on his knees with a scrub brush in his hands.

He remembered Tess as a kid, skinny and small-bosomed. Then it had been only Sally he had seen or cared about. He could not recall a time when he had not been in love with her, or a time when Burk Seever had not been around.

The voices in the other room grew sharper and Tess's tone became firm, almost overriding the deeper voice of a man. Reilly, listening with half an ear, felt memory and reality blend, and he stiffened. He knew that voice.

The man was saying, "Tess, I don't know what's got into you. It seems that you're always trying to make a case against me."

"Just get out of here and leave me alone," Tess said flatly, as Reilly Meyers stepped toward the archway.

"You're being mighty childish about this," the man said and stopped, his head coming around quickly as Reilly filled the arch. A heartbeat passed before the man regained his poise.

Then he drawled, "Well, Reilly, I see you still find the back door the handiest."

"You seem to like 'em yourself, Burk," Reilly said easily. "What are you trying to sell this time?"

He gave the big man a going over with his eyes, detecting no bulge that indicated a gun. Burk Seever was very tall, and was near Reilly's age, but his eyes were a lot older. They were quick eyes in a handsome face, moving like the play of sunlight through the spokes of a wagon wheel.

Catching a glimpse of the sawed-off Remington in Reilly's belt, Seever placed his hands flat on the glass showcase and stood motionless.

"I'm not carrying a gun," he said.

"You never did," Reilly said softly, sag-

ging against the door frame. "You always relied on your bull size." He smiled then. "I hear you got married since I've been in prison. I'll have to drop around and kiss the bride. Anyone I know, Burk?"

"Stop playing cat and mouse with me," Seever said tightly. "You got shut out and you might as well get used to the idea. Cause me any trouble and I'll bend you out of shape." He shifted his heavy shoulders restlessly. "You've come back asking for trouble. All right, we'll give you all you can handle and then some."

"Another time," Reilly said. "All I want is a little peace and quiet and for people to leave me alone. You tell that around to the wild bunch, Burk. *Just leave me alone!*"

"We'll see how that works out," Seever said and whirled, slamming the door behind him before stalking down the street.

"What a thing to have for a brother-in-law," Reilly muttered.

"Don't remind me," Tess said, and took his arm, leading him into the back room again.

SHE took a fresh pie from the rack and cut a generous slice. Coffee was on the range and she poured a cup, placing it on the long bench. After he sat down she took a place across from him, leaning her elbows on the edge.

"Why did you have to come back, Reilly? Sally?"

"That's one of the reasons," he said, between bites. "The others are hard to explain. All I could think about, when the judge handed me four years, was coming back and putting a bullet in Burke Seever. But I began to cool off after awhile. Gunning him would only hang me, because the wild bunch is too solid for one man to break with a six-shooter. No, I've thought it out, Tess. I'm going back to ranching and minding my own bsuiness. But if anybody starts to shove me around, there'll be trouble."

"All right," she said, "we'll let that pass. But why does Burk hate you so?"

"Does there have to be a reason? We just don't like each other. You can remember how we fought when were ten years old."

She shook her head in disagreement. "That was kid stuff. At the trial he wanted to put a rope around your neck and whip the horse out from under you. Why?"

"I don't know," Reilly admitted. He finished his pie.

"Do you have something on Burk or on Herb Winehaven?"

"Do you think I'd have served four years if I had?" He lowered his voice. "I stopped off at Paul Childress's to see sis and Ma. They seemed surprised that I came back."

"No one believed you would except me," Tess said. "People remember you were friendly with the wild bunch, Reilly. Sorry I had to say that but you always liked the truth, even when it pinched."

"Herb Winehaven's man lied me into prison," Reilly said. "Doesn't that prove I wasn't in on the dirty work?"

She shook her head. "Seever spread it around that you'd had a falling out with Horgan and Winehaven. That's why they tried to get you." She pressed her hands together and moved the palms against each other. "Everything's changed since you've been gone, Reilly. After Sally and Burk got married, I've had to get along the best I could. Burk wants me to sell the bakery and move in with them, but it wouldn't work. I'm not sure I'd like it if I did."

"Where are you living now?"

"Here," Tess said, and gave him a tight-lipped smile. "Don't be shocked, Reilly. I'm a grown woman and I have a gun There's a lock on the door and I put the key under my pillow every night." She saw the pie had not filled him and said, "Wait here." She went out the back door, but was back in a moment. Opening the door to a small side room, she said, "This is my home. Make yourself comfortable while I lock the front door. Business was slow anyway."

There were several chairs in the room, a bed and two dressers. There was a familiarity here, in the pictures on the walls and the curtains covering the three windows. Then he remembered them as hav-

ing been in her room in the old house on Wells Street. Sometimes, when he had been waiting for Sally to dress, he had talked to Tess, sitting on the edge of her bed while she cut dress patterns on the floor. Now that he thought about it, he remembered he had spent a great deal of time waiting for Sally.

Tess came back, toeing the door closed. "I ordered you a meal from the restaurant next door." She motioned to one of the chairs. "Sit down, Reilly."

He smiled, hunched down in the chair, and stretched out his legs. Tess sat down on the edge of the bed, her hands clasped together in her lap.

"You saw Paul Childress?" she asked. "Is everything the same?"

"Yes," he said, and rubbed the arms of the chair. "Somehow we've never been able to find common ground." Quickly he glanced at her. "I owe him more than I can repay, Tess. I was twelve when I staggered out of the desert with my sister in my arms. He took us in, raised us, but somehow we never got along."

"Reilly," she said, "don't blame Paul. He wanted to help you many times, but you would never let him. You would never let anyone help you. That's it with the bark on, Reilly. You've always been independent, and there's a price for that, too."

"I reckon," he said drily, then indicated the furniture with a wave of his hand. "Did she throw you out of the house, Tess?"

A pained expression crossed her face, but she covered it with a laugh. "Reilly, there never was room enough in one house for two women, especially when they both figure they own it."

"There was plenty of room before she got married."

"That was before," Tess said. "I knew it wouldn't work, Reilly, so I took my things and moved in here."

"After she asked you to?"

TESS bit her lips, then jumped up quickly when a knock rattled the back door. She seemed relieved at the interruption, and went out to admit a man bearing a large tray. The wall hid them from Reilly's view, but he heard her soft voice say, "Just set it on the table, Mose."

He heard the man go out. Tess carried the tray into her room, placing it on a low table. This was Reilly's first meal all day, and he wasted no time.

She watched him for a moment, then said, "Reilly, things *do* change, and stewing over them doesn't change them back. Forget what's happened and think about tomorrow."

"A nice trick if you can do it," he said between bites.

After the meal, Tess set a pot of coffee on the small stove in the corner. Tipping his chair back, Reilly watched her while he rolled a cigarette to top off this dinner.

"You sure are trying hard to keep me from seeing her, aren't you?"

"I'm trying to keep you out of trouble," she said, giving him a sharp glance. "Your temper is like heat lightning, and if you didn't shoot Burk you'd try to fight him with your fists. You've done that before and always lost. Beating Burk is something no one has ever done, Reilly. He's built quite a reputation around here, believe me."

"You're wrong if you think I'm looking for trouble," Reilly told her. "I've learned a lesson. From now on I'm leaving people alone."

"Trouble sometimes comes looking for you."

"This time I'll step aside," he said. He leaned forward, his manner changing "What made her do it, Tess?"

She shrugged. "She never liked to wait. You know that. It pleased her to have people wait for her, but never the other way around."

"She knew I'd come back," Reilly said. "I promised her, Tess. You were there—you heard me promise her."

"You promised a lot of things, and some of them didn't turn out." She poured coffee for him, then stood with her arms crossed over her breasts. "You've changed, Reilly. I think you'd keep a promise now." She gave him a wide smile. "See how canny I am, now that I'm grown up? I'm

not the little girl you can tell stories to any more."

He smiled in spite of his serious thoughts. She was like mercury, never still. Her mind raced ahead, touching life, liking some of it and rejecting what she disliked. She had a natural exuberance, an elastic outlook on life that no amount of unpleasantness could dim for long.

"I've been noticing," Reilly said, "that you've filled out some. It seems that Burk Seever's noticed it, too."

"Then you can see why I can't live with Sally and him." She switched the subject deftly. "What was it like, Reilly? Bad?"

"Prison? Pretty bad. Once a man's inside, he becomes just another animal." He stared at the ash on his smoke, then rose to throw it in the stove. "Tell me, is Harry Peters still the U. S. Marshal?"

"Yes," she said. "I think he was genuinely sorry about the deal you got, but you did the shooting in California and there was nothing he could do about it."

"Sure," Reilly said, and stared at the fire through the damper opening. "I got four years on the rock pile for trying to get back what had been stolen from me, but Winehaven, who has a stockyard full of rustled beef, is still in business. Does that make sense?"

"Harry Peters made three raids on Winehaven's place and never found a thing that wasn't covered with a bill of sale. You figure it out, Reilly. No one else can."

"It's not my problem," he said flatly. "I've thought this over for four years, and I'm not trying to get even with anybody." He turned his head and looked at her. She remained half-turned toward him as though inviting his appraisal. Finally he pulled his eyes away and refilled the coffee cups. "You used to sit like that, watching me," he said softly. "I've often wondered what you were thinking, Tess."

"Did you?"

SHE stood up, a half-smile lifting the corners of her lips. When she came near him, he set his cup aside and took her arm, pulling her against him. She did not fight, but answered to the pressure of his lips and the pull of his hands around her hips.

After they stood apart once more, she studied him gravely. "Were you thinking of Sally?"

"I was thinking of you," he said softly.

"Then it's all right," she told him, and turned back to her coffee.

The sun was down now and gray shadows began to invade the room. Tess moved about, lighting the lamps. Finishing his coffee, Reilly walked back and forth, pushed by a deep restlessness.

Tess Isham watched this for several minutes, then said. "You don't have to stay."

His pacing stopped. "Tess, it isn't that at all." From her expression he was sure he hadn't convinced her.

"I understand, Reilly. Give me credit for it." She stacked the dishes on the tray. Taking a shawl from the closet, she moved to the door, pausing with her hand on the knob. "Wait here."

"Where are you going?"

She regarded him levelly. "Out. Just wait here."

He listened to her heels on the hardwood floor. Then the back door slammed, and quiet came. Street sounds filtered through the walls, muffled and seemingly from a great distance. He crossed to the side window to look out, but the night was thick and he could see nothing.

Rolling a cigarette he smoked it short, then built another. There was some coffee left, but he had finished it by the time the back door opened and closed. He put the cup down and looked uncertain. He was like a stranger, visiting, when the doorbell rings and there is no one to answer it.

Stepping away from the table, he moved across the room. Flinging the door open, he stepped through and to one side so that the shaft of lamplight would cut the darkness beyond.

A breath of perfume touched him and a familiar voice said, "Aren't you going to kiss me, Reilly?"

"Sally!" His voice was shocked. "What are you doing here?"

She moved past him and into her sister's room. With the lamplight on her, she turned slowly and gave him a full view of her beauty. Her hair was golden and piled high in a bun on her head. Her lips were full, and the lashes bringing her dark eyes touched her cheeks when she offered him half-veiled glances.

"Do I pass inspection, Reilly?"

"You haven't changed," he said softly, his eyes traveling over the soft curves revealed by a flowing dress, tight at waist and bodice.

"But *you* have," she said. "More serious, I think, and not quite so impulsive." She held his eyes with her own. "You're angry because I married Burk, aren't you?"

"You want a silly answer to that one?"

"Sorry," she said. "Both for asking the question and not believing you when you said you'd come back to me. What was a girl to do, sit and wait?"

"I had to sit and wait, and they put bars around the place to make sure of it."

"I don't want to quarrel with you," Sally said. "All right, so I made a mistake. What do I have to do to prove I'm sorry? Draw blood?"

"Forget it," Reilly said, and studied the rug pattern. "You're sorry, I'm sorry, so let's just forget it."

"Don't be that way," Sally said quickly. "I know you think it was foolish of me to come here like this, but Tess came to the house and said you were here. I just had to see you again. Don't ask me why."

"I don't have to," Reilly told her. "You always had a tough time making up your mind who you liked. You had to come because you're remembering how it used to be with us, and you're wondering if it will ever be that way again. I'm not going to sneak off behind Burk's back, Sally, and don't think you can make me. You're trouble to me now, so you go your way and I'll go mine."

TIPPING her head back, she laughed at him. "I can see right through you, Reilly. You're jealous! Every time the sun goes down you'll begin to sweat, and whatever you're doing you'll stop, wondering about Burk and me. Go ahead and think, Reilly. Make up a lot of pictures, but remember that they'll only be pictures." Her smile widened and something sly

moved into her eyes. "I've always wanted a child. I think I'll take the subject up with my husband."

"You can hate like a Piute," he said softly.

with the Indian Agency buying beef you'll be back with the wild bunch where the easy money is. You'll go back because without me that dirt pile ranch of yours will be unbearable."

"Hey," Reilly said, "where did you learn to do that?"

"You're the hater," she snapped, her temper exposed now, "and the sign's really on you. Winehaven is still in business, and

"Are you finished?"

"No! Not until I have you back. You're going to take me back, aren't you, Reilly?"

She came close to him and slipped her arms around his neck, pressing against him. She could use her body and her lips, and her fervor reached a fever pitch before she released him. His intention had been to resist her, but when his emotion became too strong he tried to break away. Instead he ended with her crushed against him and all resolution gone.

When she pushed away and raised her hands to straighten her hair, the material of her dress pulled tight across her breasts. She wore a slightly superior smile as she said, "It isn't over between us, Reilly. It's just begun."

Her casualness shocked him. "Sally, I think you *want* me killed."

Her hand pressed the butt of his Remington. "Perhaps I'm trying to get my husband killed."

"Get out of here." he said flatly. "Why did you come here? To pull me apart?"

"Don't make this any more difficult," she said. "Reilly, we used to make a lot of plans. What ever happened to them?"

"They're dead. Sally, keep away from me!" He shook his head. "You're married, and no matter how much I wanted you, I couldn't have you now."

She turned to face him, the smile on her full lips, warm with pleasure. "You do want me, and Burk won't make any difference between us. Not to you he wouldn't. Reilly, you haven't changed in that way. I can see it now. You always took what you wanted. Take me! Do you think I love him?"

"You married him. Sally, I don't want trouble, with Burk or anybody else."

"Are you afraid of him?"

He shook his head. "That won't work any more. There was a time when that taunt would make me fight him, but not now. I *have* changed. Prison will change anyone. You made a deal with Burk, and you'd better stick to it."

"I'll go back," she said. "But stick to it? No."

He touched her arm. "What do you want? Do you really know?"

She smiled, and her voice was soft. "I'm selfish, Reilly. You've always known that. Maybe I don't want Tess to have you. Let's not pretend, Reilly. We both know she's been making calf eyes at you since she was thirteen. At times I've wondered if you were taking her into the hayloft."

"Did that worry you?" His voice was faintly amused.

Her shoulders rose and fell. "At the time it might have, but I've learned a few things since then. She was a fool, coming to the house after me just now. Burk's at the saloon with Jane Alford and he won't be home until morning. What he does no longer concerns me, Reilly."

"That's a coincidence," he said. "I don't give a damn either."

"I said he wouldn't be home until morning." She gave him a bolder glance. "How much time do you want, Reilly?" She moved against him. "Tess is waiting in the alley. If you turned the key and blew out the lamp she'd go away. You really don't want me to leave, do you?"

"The sooner the better," he said, nodding toward the door.

She gave him a short, brittle laugh. "And here I had it all figured out." She stepped away from him. "I believe I *am* sorry I came here, but I'm not giving up."

"Don't come back," Reilly said and took her arm, steering her toward the door.

SHE offered no protest, but stopped in the doorway. "I've heard of people being thrown out, but I never thought it would happen to me." Reaching out, she slipped an arm around his neck, pulling him close. "Look at me, Reilly. Tell me you don't love me."

"You'd better go."

She teased him with laughter and came against him, her lips searching for his. Her arms held him with a new power, and when at last she pulled away she was pleased and composed.

"I'll be back. You won't stop me, Reilly, no matter what you say. You won't, because you want me with you."

Going through the darkened back room, Sally let herself out, and Reilly was alone. His coffee was cold but he lifted the cup anyway. His hand was shaking.

Tess came in and closed the door, leanning her back against it. She searched him with her eyes, then said, "Nothing's changed, has it?"

"You're talking like a fool!" He didn't look at her.

"Am I?" She came away from the door. took the cup from him and took a long drink from it, watching over the rim. Handing it back, she said. "From now on you'll do everything wrong because she won't let you do otherwise. She never lets go until a thing is done. You think I'm horrible for talking about my sister like that? Maybe I am."

"She did all the talking, Tess."

"I know. I know how it goes. I've heard it before. She's heading you into trouble, Reilly."

"Not me." he said. "I'm not going to bother with her."

"I don't suppose you will," she said, "but she'll bother you until nothing will matter except you and her being together again. She taught me all the tricks, and I saw her work them on you." Turning her back on him, she added, "You'd better go now."

"Will I see you again, Tess?"

"Perhaps. I don't know. I shouldn't have let you kiss me."

He stood there until he was certain she was not going to turn back, then picked up his hat and went to the door. Pausing there, he said, "I wasn't lying, Tess. It was you I was thinking of."

"It doesn't matter. You're thinking of Sally now, and that washes everything out to another shade."

"Does it?"

"Please go, Reilly."

"All right," he said and went out, picking up his rifle on the way.

His horse was still tied at the rack and he led him to the stable at the end of the street. Reilly was off-saddling and turning the stud into a back stall when Ben Cannoyer, the liveryman, came in.

"Better take him out back. I got a mare that's horsing and I don't want my stall kicked apart."

Without argument, Reilly bedded the stud down in an old carriage shed in the back compound. When he returned Cannoyer was waiting in the stable arch, puffing on his pipe. One lantern hung from a stanchion. Reilly laid out his blanket roll and opened it.

Cannoyer shifted and said, "Careful with that lantern. I don't want any fires here."

Reilly ignored the testy old man and took out a clean shirt, put it on. At a watering trough a few feet from the arch he washed his face and hands.

Cannoyer said, "The hotel's up the street. Baths are four bits in the barber shop. They got a tub there."

Reilly smiled faintly and slipped into his coat before rolling his blankets. Cannoyer left the arch and came back to watch.

He said, "Couldn't help noting the brand on that stud—Broken Bit. You and the old man patch it up?"

"Anything need patching?" Reilly stared at the old man.

"None of my business anyway," the liveryman said. He glanced at the gun in Reilly's belt. "Been a lot of work done on that, hasn't there?"

"Some," Reilly said, tossing his bedroll into an empty stall.

"Knew a feller in Ellsworth who has his pistols worked on. Short barrels and no front sights. Trouble was, he tried to pull them out one night and found it didn't help against a good man."

"You got any good men around here?" Reilly asked.

The old man shrugged and hooked one suspender strap back on his thin shoulder. "A man can't talk to you when you're on the peck." He turned and went back to the stable door, closing one side and dropping the locking pin into the worn sill. Taking his chair, he elevated it against the door frame and cocked his feet on the other side.

REILLY watched this. Then Cannoyer turned his head and smiled. If Reilly had suspected the old man was barring the exit, he was sure when Ben Cannoyer said, "You weren't in a hurry, were you, Reilly?"

Past the stable door the street was bright with streaked lamplight, and people were

moving up and down. Cannoyer raised himself and lit the lantern hanging in the doorway, and a puddle of yellow light fell on the hoof-chopped yard.

Reilly walked to the old man's outstretched foot and said, "Let me through, Ben."

"Let's talk a spell," Cannoyer said, knocking out his pipe. "The news got around that you were coming back, Reilly. There was some talk about what you'd do."

"You mean would I go after Herb Winehaven?"

Cannoyer nodded. "Sheriff Henderson got word you had been released. He's been waiting for you."

"Let him wait," Reilly said, glancing at the old man's leg. "Better pick it up, Ben," he said, and Cannoyer lifted it slowly.

Old Ben rubbed his unshaven jaws with the back of his hand. His shirt sleeves, rolled to the elbows, exposed red flannel underwear that sagged from skinny arms.

Reilly saw that little had changed in Buckeye in his absence

"See you had to show your muscles in the bakery," he said. He bent forward and added softly, "Sally Seever was seen coming out the alley about the same time you were there. A man'd have to be pretty dumb not to be able to figure that out, wouldn't he?"

"I don't know. How dumb are you, Ben?" Reilly gave him a level stare. Deep shadows boxed the younger man's face as Cannoyer stared back. Reilly seemed older than he actually was. And the gun in his waistband gave him a touch of danger.

"It's none of my business, I reckon," Cannoyer admitted.

"That's right, Ben, it isn't."

"But I wouldn't hang around Buckeye if I were you. When Burk sniffs the wind he's liable to come looking for you, boy."

"I won't be hard to find," Reilly said, and broke off when a fringed-top buggy wheeled into the yard.

A small man alighted, peering through the darkness at Reilly and Cannoyer. When he stepped closer, Reilly raised his head so that lanternlight bathed his face.

"Well," Harry Peters said, surprised. "thought we'd seen the last of you." His voice was soft and faintly amused.

"Lay off," Reilly said. "I'm clean and you know it."

Harry Peters smiled and the ends of his mustache lifted slightly. The marshal was a moon-faced man who wore a derby and a shaggy buffalo coat. An ignited cigar was between his teeth, and the brown ends of a dozen more protruded from an inside coat pocket.

Removing his smoke from his lips, Peters rotated it between thumb and forefinger as he said, "A good cigar is like a loose woman, Reilly—a comfort a man may regret."

"Never use 'em," Reilly said, and smiled.

"I like to see virtue in a man," Peters said. He shrugged his shoulders beneath the heavy coat. "Turning chilly, Ben. Won't be long until winter."

Cannoyer grunted and refilled his pipe. "How's the marshaling business, Harry?"

"A steady job," Peters said blandly. "Are Paul Childress and Jim Buttelow in town yet?"

"At the hotel," the old man said. "Some others, too."

"Thanks," Peters said, and licked a loose shard of tobacco dangling from his cigar. Glancing at Reilly, he added, "Behave yourself now. I don't want to spend the winter chasing you. Too damn cold."

"Don't lose sleep over it," Reilly said. "I'm wintering out at my own place, if it hasn't blown away."

"That," Peters said, "sounds monotonous." He turned and walked down the street.

"Funny feller," Ben Cannoyer said, thoughtfully. "Doesn't look like a U. S. marshal, now does he?"

"How does a marshal look?"

"Maybe not so runty," Cannoyer said. He shot Reilly a shrewd glance. "Still, he hasn't stopped the rustling, has he?"

"You're telling me the story," Reilly said. "I've been away."

He turned toward the saloon.

SITTING in the wide arcade of the hotel, Paul Childress watched the traffic flow past, turning his head when Al Murdock came out of the dining room with Emily Meyers.

Murdock, in his late twenties, was a tall man with pride and authority about him. His face was too rough-cut to be called handsome, but there was a steadiness about him, a latent charm that made him popular. Emily, barely twenty, was a small, dark-haired girl with eyes like her brother, Reilly's. Occasionally Paul Childress had felt uneasy when Emily looked at him steadily as she searched out some truth. She was a quiet girl, not given to flip talk as so many women were.

"I'm going over to see if that linen has come in from Fort Reno," Emily said and left the porch, walking rapidly down the street.

Murdock glanced at Childress, spotted the empty chair, and sat down. His voice was a soft drawl. "We're overstocked again for winter graze, Paul. You want me to move some of 'em down from the north and let them winter by the creek?"

"Whatever you think is best."

"We need another forty tons of hay," Murdock said. "The cash is getting low again. I'll see Hammerslip at the bank in the morning." He removed his battered hat and ran fingers through unruly hair.

"What's eating you, Al?" Childress laid a flaming match across the bowl of his pipe. He gave Murdock a darting glance. "Worried about Reilly?"

"Some. That hothead is going to get into it again if he isn't careful."

"He's a grown man," Childress said, somewhat bitterly. "He's been telling me for years how well he could take care of himself. Let him."

Murdock was silent for a moment. "Paul, I've never stuck my nose in, but there's always seemed to be something between you and Reilly."

"You think that?" Childress stared at Murdock.

"Reilly could use a friend, some understanding. You never went near him when he was in jail, or attended the trial. I don't guess you wrote him, either."

"Reilly's always wanted to take his own hard knocks, Al. I've had my hands slapped enough. So I stay out of his business."

"I guess you know what you're doing," Murdock murmured, and fell silent.

Murdock worried too much, Childress decided. He looked at his foreman and said, "You and Reilly were never pals. Why all the concern?"

Tipping back his chair, Murdock elevated his feet. When his eyes moved along the street they swung like the needle of a compass, quickly, restless in their searching, pausing only with reluctance.

"I'm going to be shirt-tail kin to Reilly, come spring. A man's got his obligations, that's all."

"He's headstrong," Childress warned "He doesn't like people to mess." Touching Murdock on the arm, the old rancher drew his attention to two men dismounting across the street. "There are Reilly's two wild friends from Jim Buttelow's. Go over there before they come here. I don't like 'em to raise hell when I'm relaxing."

Dropping his feet to the floor, Murdock

went across the street as Walt and Ernie Slaughter tied up. As Murdock ducked under the hitch-rail, the Slaughters focused their attention along the boardwalk on Reilly Meyers, who was coming toward them through the darkness.

Night lay in thick patches, broken only by the bars of flung lamplight. Reilly flickered from patch to patch as he moved along the building edges. The Slaughters waited until he came abreast and then, with wild shouts, leaped on him and smothered him in a flurry of arms.

The force of the attack carried Reilly against the building with a jarring crash, and he went down beneath their combined weight. Murdock ran up and fisted a handful of Ernie's hair, pulling him off Reilly.

"Let him up," Murdock said. "You damn fools, don't you do anything but play?"

Murdock's voice cooled Reilly, and he struggled to his feet. Grabbing the Slaughters roughly, he pulled them into the light. Then his face broke into a wide smile and laughter glinted in his eyes.

"Damn pranksters," he said. "When are you two going to grow up?"

"That's for old folks," Ernie said, and grabbed Reilly's arm. "Now let's catch up on some living."

FROM the open door of Burkhauser's Saloon the sound of a tinny piano floated out and a voice sang:

Fond of fun as fun can be,
When it's on the strict q.t.

They listened for a moment, then Walt Slaughter rubbed his stomach. He was a slat-lean man, near thirty, and on his face a latent danger lay. Pleasure glowed in his pale eyes. "Danged if I don't feel like having a drink on this," he said. "When did you get back, Reilly?"

"Today. Things have changed some."

Ernie glanced at his brother and said, "Some have." He looked around restlessly, as though searching for someone. "Let's go have a look at the elephant playing the banjo."

"You think there's one in there?" Reilly shouldered the batwings aside.

They filed in, Murdock trailing behind, and all bellied against the cherrywood. A girl was prancing across the stage, kicking her black-stockinged legs high.

Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay
Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay

Reilly seemed fascinated with her, an odd stirring of remembrance on his face. Taking Ernie by the arm, he pulled his attention around. "That widow that lived by Alder Creek—isn't that her daughter?"

"Yeah," Ernie said, and his eyes grew unpleasant. "Burk Seever threw her over to marry Sally Isham."

Turning back to the bar, Reilly stared at the triangle formed by his forearms. "Is this all she can do for a living?"

"Singing's just a side line," Murdock said, and Ernie showed quick resentment.

Walt saw this and braced a shoulder against his brother's chest, giving him a gentle shove backward. "Forget it."

"Sure," Ernie murmured and glanced at Al Murdock.

The broken Bit foreman looked ill at ease. "Sorry, Ernie. My mouth's too big." He turned his head for a last look at the girl, then studied bar's polished surface.

The bartender came up cautiously and when Reilly raised his head, the barman stiffened slightly, his hands sliding to the carved edge of the bar. Neither man spoke. Then the bartender got control of his voice.

"Don't try anything with me, Reilly. I got a double-barreled shotgun under here and I'll blow a hole in your guts if you so much as lay a hand on me."

"Now what would I have against you, Elmer?" Reilly's voice was soft. He laughed. "When did you leave Winehaven? Is this better than slaughtering rustled beef?"

Elmer Loving made a nervous movement with his feet. "You act like a man with a guilty conscience," Reilly said, the good nature in his voice vanishing like a puff of smoke. "There'll be no trouble *tonight* Elmer. Just leave the bottle and get."

"Sure," Elmer said, and went to the far end of the bar.

For a moment there was silence, then Ernie said, "Somebody drink to my health. I feel faint."

Murdock came to his rescue.

"Pour until it burns my hand," Walt said, sliding his own glass down the bar. To Reilly he said, "I'd say Elmer Loving was still on the list, huh?"

"Shouldn't he be?" There was a hardness in Reilly's face. "I did four years in the pen, remember?"

"So you did," Walt said drily, and glanced at his brother.

Ernie was looking at the empty stage, while Reilly fastened his eyes on Elmer Loving. The bartender grew increasingly nervous, and finally could stand it no longer. He came back.

He met Reilly's stare. "You want to start something with me?"

"I'd like to unscrew your damned head," Reilly said pleasantly, "but that's a pleasure that will have to wait." He leaned on his forearms. "Who paid you to lie, Elmer?"

"You're barking up the wrong tree," Elmer said, making aimless motions with the bar rag. "Don't make trouble for me, Reilly, because I've got friends who'll eat you whole."

Reilly spoke softly. "I'm going to be around, Elmer. One of these days we're going to get together, just you and me, and have a nice long chat."

"You're not scaring me," Loving said, and waited a moment before moving away. He wanted to create the illusion of fearlessness.

THE girl in the black stockings had come back on stage and was finishing another song. Reilly turned his head to watch her. Leaving the stage, she walked among the tables, and in a moment started for the bar. She was tall and shapely, but her dress was cheap. Beneath the rouge and lip paint lay a natural beauty but she seemed to wear makeup to disguise rather than to accent it.

When she saw Ernie Slaughter at the bar she halted quickly and half turned away. Then her bare shoulders moved slightly as though she were shrugging something aside. She came toward them, a wide, dead smile stretching her lips.

Ernie spoke gravely and with great gentleness. "How are you, Jane?"

Jane Alford laughed, a brittle, forced sound, and the smile remained on her lips although it did not creep into her eyes. They were blue and very remote. She deliberately held herself back, never revealing what she really thought or what she felt.

"I'm sober," she said. "But drunk or sober, I'm happy."

Reilly Meyers was half-hidden by Al Murdock's shoulders. When she saw him, her smile died and her lips turned stiff.

Reilly said, "Don't you remember me, Jane?" His smile was genuine and when he looked at her there was nothing bold in his eyes.

"I . . . Reilly, get out of here! If these two knotheads had an ounce of brains between them they would never have brought you here." She swung on Ernie Slaughter, openly angry. "Haven't you any better sense than to flaunt him before Burk?"

She turned her head slightly and glanced past Ernie. Burk Seever's eyes were boring into her from across the room. Seever was at a table beside the far wall. When Reilly looked, he found the big man's stare a thing so solid that it almost rang like a struck saber blade.

Between them animosity lay, a natural thing, ready to lash out without excuse. Placing his cards face down, Burk Seever left his table and came toward them.

When he reached the bar he raised a finger to Elmer Loving and said, "Out of the private bottle, Loving." He glanced then at Ernie Slaughter and added, "If you'd move down I'd have a little more room."

"You move," Ernie said, and braced his body against the bar, blocking Seever.

A dancing light appeared in Burk's eyes, but he laughed. When he looked at Jane Alford he let his eyes wander over her stockinged legs and off-the-shoulder dress. "Run along, honey. Sell it to the customers."

"She likes it here," Ernie said flatly, and drew Seever's eyes like a powerful magnet.

Running his hand across his mouth, Burk pawed it out of shape. His eyes were bold and demanding as he played this rough game, enjoying it. Tension swirled around them.

Reilly Meyers said, "Before you get lathered up, Burk, I want to tell you that Sally called on me at the bakery. Just thought you'd like to know."

The sound of Elmer Loving's moving bar rag was audible, so quiet did it become then.

"Damn you," Seever said, surprised and disappointed. He had a good fight started in his mind, and Reilly had cleverly pulled his teeth.

Reilly began to push from another angle. "We were having a friendly drink until you butted in. Why don't you pull your picket now?"

"Don't talk big to me; you're not built for it." Burk didn't look at Jane Alford when he said, "I told you to peddle it!"

She took a step away and Ernie reached out, fastening a hand on her arm, halting her. Reilly saw anger in Seever's face and said, "You've got yourself all primed, but I'll tell you now—don't start it. There's enough of us here to stomp a hole in your head. You'd better move on."

Reilly's soft voice seemed to drive Seever's anger deeper. "I'm not going to fool you, Reilly. I'll give it to you straight out—you're headed for trouble. I tied a can to your tail once and I'll do a better job of it the next time. Get out of the country! That's good advice."

"Go back to your busted flush," Reilly said.

"You're getting nervy," Seever said. "You got nervy once at Winehaven's place. Keep away from my wife. If I hear of you bothering her I'll break up your face so no woman would have you."

He struck the bar with his fist and wheeled away, striding rapidly back to the waiting card game.

Walt Slaughter grinned and said, "He's mad as hell, isn't he?"

REILLY grinned and took another drink, feeling it slide warmly down, settling in a pool of fire in his stomach.

"You're dumber than you were when you left," Jane Alford said bluntly. "Can't you see he's out to get you, that they're all after you?"

Reilly's interest sharpened. "Tell me why, Jane. What did I see at Herb Winehaven's that he's afraid I'll remember?"

Her face became smooth and her eyes more remote and unfriendly. "I work here. I don't know anything." Ernie still held her arm and she said to him, "I have to go now, Ernie."

"You don't have to go any place," he told her, but dropped his hand.

"I *have* to go," she repeated, and moved away. The four men watched her walk among the tables, smiling with her lips alone.

On Ernie Slaughter's young face there was a quiet thoughtfulness that pushed the laughter out of his eyes as he nursed his drink. Plainly he wished to be left alone.

Murdock swung their attention away from Ernie when he said, "Considering the size of Buckeye, and that ranches are few and far between, Burk has come a long way. He handles all the beef contracts for the Piute Agency, besides his law practice. Somehow money just seems to stick to his fingers, and from the way he spends it his addition must be something new and different."

"You trying to say something?" Walt asked.

"Could be," Murdock said. He swung around, hooking his elbows on the edge of the bar. "Let's say that a man makes a hundred a week being a lawyer. If so, how can he spend a hundred and fifty?" He shook his head sadly. "You two clowns break horses for a living, but I manage a ranch. When I lose ten head, I fret and cuss out the hands. When a hundred head turns up missing, I'm out a lot of sleep."

"Not that bad, is it?" Reilly's face was sober.

Murdock snorted. "You know, I haven't got enough money on the books to show a decent profit this last year? As a safe

guess I'd say that at least a thousand head have been rustled in the last ten months." He tallied it up on his fingers. "Bob Ackroyd at the Hat has lost some. Swan Lovelock's Lazy U has been hit bad. Your Hangnoose brand is gone, Reilly; we couldn't hold it together for you. Max Horgan's Chain claims to have lost steers." He shook his head. "Where do they go? The Piute Agency? Harry Peters says no, but when the beef contracts are posted in Seever's office they don't buy enough to feed the squaws."

"Why not go to the reservation on issue day?" Reilly asked.

Murdock shook his head. "Seever buys and then resells. Everything goes through him and the agent in Carson City. We fill out a contract and a check is mailed. After his cut, we get ours."

"That sounds like a tight little set-up," Reilly murmured, pushing his glass in aimless circles. "A deal between Seever and the agent?"

"What else?" Murdock said. "But what does it prove? Harry Peters has been rapping his head against the wall trying to find the break, but there isn't any. Seever doesn't rustle cattle. Herb Winehaven's slaughterhouse has been clean every time Peters has raided it. Horgan is clean, at least Peters and Sheriff Henderson say so." Murdock sighed and changed the subject. "You going back to your place, Reilly?"

"Nowhere else to go. The brand's registered and the land's mine."

"You could move on some place else," Murdock suggested. "A man can get to a point where there's nothing else he can do Why don't you think it over?"

"Already have."

"The deck's stacked here. Seever is after you because of you and Sally. Henderson and Horgan would like to see you dead and gone. You tell me why, because I can't figure it out. You make Herb Winehaven nervous. How can you buck that hand?"

"I'm going to try," Reilly said, and touched a money belt beneath his shirt. "There's six hundred here, enough to keep me a year. In that time I'll either be on top or flat broke."

"All right," Murdock said resignedly. Rolling a smoke, he kept his attention on the tobacco. The sense of fairness that ruled him was now satisfied; he owed Reilly Meyers nothing more. Raising his eyes, he looked at his future brother-in-law and asked, "Another for the road?"

"No," Reilly said. "I'm going to get me a box of rifle shells and head for the hills."

"Luck," Murdock said, and raised his glass.

Ernie and Walt said nothing, but Ernie winked at Reilly before he turned and went out.

PAUSING on the porch for a moment, Reilly surveyed the traffic, then cut across and went into the hardware store. Childress was still on the hotel porch, but Reilly did not speak to him. They had said all there was to say years ago, and now they just nodded and remained silent. Reilly did not want it this way, but how was he going to breach this gap? He didn't know. Two other men were sitting with Childress, men who had no particular friendliness for Reilly Meyers, so he passed on.

Bolder's store was one large room, lamplit now and filled with the mingled smells of leather, bolted cloth and stored paint. At the counter, Reilly waited until Bolder finished waiting on Mrs. Ketchem. Bolder was a shriveled man, fifty some, with the pinched face of a man who counts money in his sleep.

Reilly laid down a gold piece. "Two boxes of forty-four forties, Gabe."

The merchant laid them on the counter, then made change in his slow, careful way. Sounds from the street came and once a man's shoes hit the boardwalk with a hollow thump.

"You figure on staying?" Bolder asked.

"I might," Reilly said. Bolder was leaning against the counter, his hands spread along the edge as a brace.

The heavy footfalls outside had stopped and from the doorway Burk Seever said, "He's *not* staying."

Reilly turned slowly. Lamplight fell on

Seever's face, making an oily shine on his skin. Seever took a step into the room. "You're leaving, Reilly."

"Are you looking for some fun, Burk?" Reilly laughed softly, but there was no humor in his eyes. He raised his hand and touched the butt of his sawed-off Remington. "I can give you trouble, Burk."

"You won't use a gun on me," Seever said.

He turned his head slightly as footsteps approached from his rear. A young man paused in the doorway, his eyes round and innocent. He looked first at Reilly Meyers, then at Burk Seever.

"If this is private," he said, "I can go some place else."

"It's open to the public," Reilly said.

The young man smiled, taking another step into the room. He drew Reilly's attention like a magnet, for in the young man's face there was a daring, a recklessness that reminded him of times past when he had believed the world was fun and that hills were made to be ridden over.

Seever half turned to include the young man in his vision. "Get out of here, or get in front of me where I can see you."

Stubbornness flared in the young stranger's eyes, a clear rashness. "Something bothering you?" he asked softly.

"I won't ask you again," Seever warned.

"I'll just bet you won't," the young man said and leaned against the door frame, his legs crossed.

To those in the store it seemed that the sounds of the street had been stilled. A crowd began to gather outside the door, lining the boardwalk solidly, five deep. The piano in Burkhauser's stopped playing as the men in the store let the problem seesaw back and forth.

Finally Seever stepped deeper into the room, toward Reilly, putting the young man out of jumping distance. Seever's weight made the plank floor protest, and in the coffee mill a few beans that had clung to the rolled rim came loose and clattered loudly in the hopper.

"Move away from there," Seever said, and Reilly left the counter, moving down to where ax handles stood in a barrel.

"I like to lean," Reilly said. He shook out tobacco, rolled a smoke, and struck a match against one of the handles. His eyes laughed when they met Seever's over the flame.

Seever jumped slightly when Reilly tossed the makings to the young man. Now the only sound in the room was the big man's angry breathing. The onlookers jamming the street made no sound at all.

Seever said, "This is between you and me, Reilly. You don't want this kid to get hurt, do you?"

"He can make up his own mind," Reilly said softly, and plucked one of the ax handles from the barrel, running his hand along the smooth wood.

Uneasiness began to work in Seever's face. Out on the street a horse and rider went by, the hoofs making popping sounds in the dust.

Reilly said, "If you don't want your skull caved in, then walk out of here now."

Swinging his head from the young man to Reilly, Seever wiped away all the veneer of culture and became a primitive man, governed by his own violent nature.

"You sure got guts," he growled. "Are you afraid to use your fists?"

"I might break 'em on your hard head. Better get out now. You're wearing it pretty thin."

"Sure," Seever said, and managed a forced grin. "Some other time, Reilly." His eyes went around and fastened on the young man. "I'll be seeing *you*, too."

"I can hardly wait," the youthful stranger said as Seever went out with plunging strides, battering his way through the throng packing the boardwalk.

One man said, "By golly, that was a freeze-out!"

The crowd began to break up and Bolder went back for a whisky bottle he kept hidden behind the cider press.

Reilly looked at the young man and said, "You like your fun with hair on it."

"Any way that's fun," the youngster said. He gave Reilly a lopsided grin and stepped to the door, pausing on the walk for a moment before crossing to Burkhauser's Saloon.

The piano was going full blast again and sound filled the town.

BOB ACKROYD of the Hat, Swan Lovelock of the Lazy U, and Paul Childress were still sitting on the hotel porch when Burk Seever came out of Bolder's hardware store and stalked across the street. None of the men spoke when Reilly Meyers came out and headed for Cannoyer's stable to get his horse. The young man who had left the hardware store a moment before Reilly came sauntering up the walk.

Bob Ackroyd leaned over the porch rail and said, "Hey, what happened?"

"You saw who came out first, didn't you?" The young man shied his smoke into the street and gave Ackroyd a frank glance—neither bold nor wise, just an appraisal. "That's what happened," he added, and walked on down the street.

"That might have been worth seeing," Lovelock said. "Burk doesn't back up easy."

Childress slapped the arms of his chair. "Time we paid Peters a call."

"Buttelow's across the street. You want him along?"

"Tell him," Childress said.

Ackroyd crossed the street. On the saloon porch, he fronted the swinging doors, then recoiled as two men charged through, locked in each other's arms and fighting with drunken intensity. Ackroyd lost interest and went into the saloon.

The two men fought on, paying no attention to the gathering crowd. Farther down, the young man who had been in Bolder's store elbowed his way through to the center of the crowd of spectators. One of the fighters swung and missed, then wheeled suddenly and struck the young man on the mouth, driving him backward. Almost instantly he was in the fight, beating his antagonist down with short punches. With the odds uneven, the crowd took a new interest in the battle. Surprisingly, the two fighters seemed cold sober now, and concentrated on a quick finish.

The young man went down and was jumped before he had a chance to regain his feet. Childress and the others sitting across the street could hear the impact of flesh and fist. Then Sheriff Henderson pushed his way through, collared the young man and jerked him roughly to his feet.

Without warning Henderson whipped his long-barreled Smith & Wesson out of the holster and cracked the young man across the head with it. Muttered protests went up as Murdock, Jim Buttelow, and Ackroyd came out of Burkhauser's just in time to see what had happened. Pushing his way through to the sheriff, Ackroyd spoke tersely and the sheriff's head came around quick. He was sullen, ready for trouble.

Then Ackroyd and the two men with him went on across the street. Childress and Lovelock left the porch. All of them watched Henderson drag the unconscious man off to jail.

"That seemed damn sudden to me," Lovelock muttered. "It's hell when a man can't have a little fun without landing in the pokey."

"The other two beat it quick enough," Buttelow said. He was a man in the shadow of sixty, rifle straight, with a mane of white hair. He wore his mustache long, and a waterfall haircut touched his coat.

At the far corner, the sheriff's prisoner began to come around, and Henderson belted him again. Murdock growled, "Somebody ought to take care of him."

"Stay out of it," Childress said warningly. He glanced at Buttelow. "You seen Reilly? He's going back to his old place. There could be trouble over that."

Buttelow grunted. "Trouble and Reilly go hand in hand." He nodded toward the street from which the sheriff and the young man had now disappeared. "Like him. He's having fun, but tomorrow he'll be in jail."

"Peters is at the New Congress Hotel," Childress said. "Let's walk down and have a talk."

Each nodded, and they turned down the street. Lovelock looked back once, then walked on, head down, until they turned into a side street to reach the New Congress, a two-story frame building, the older of Buckeye's two hotels. Passing through

the lobby, they mounted the protesting stairs and Childress rapped on a door halfway down the hall.

"Come in," the marshall's voice said. Buttelow opened the door and waited for the others to pass ahead of him.

Without his shaggy coat Peters seemed even smaller, a slightly dapper man. He shook hands all around and waved them to chairs.

"I was about to come to see you," he said. He patted his pockets for a cigar, found one and touched a match to it. Glancing at each of his visitors in turn, he said, "If you're expecting good news from the Carson City office, I'll have to disappoint you. After three years of work we still have no evidence that will stand up in court."

"That song's getting on my nerves," Childress said. "We're losing beef."

"The country is against you," Peters said, and puffed his cigar. "It's against all of us. The land is too dry and the vegetation too poor. With a cow for every thirty acres, a man's holdings are too far spread. You've got three men on your payroll, Paul, not counting Al here. How many acres? Twenty thousand, at least. That's spreading men out thin, and you know it."

"I can't afford any more," Childress snapped. "With all the rustling going on I'm not making enough to support a full crew."

"I know," Peters said, pausing to shy ashes into the woodbox. "The rustlers know it and are taking advantage of it. We're up against a big thing here, but we won't whip it easily. It seems they know where the cattle are bunched, and by the time Henderson gets on the trail they're in the rocks and the tracks peter out."

"One time the tracks didn't peter out," Murdock said softly, "but Reilly got four years for his trouble."

HARRY PETERS shot the Broken Bit foreman an irritated glance.

Lovelock said, "Can't we get Henderson out of office?"

"Vote him out," Peters suggested. "You voted him in there."

"Two years until election," Bob Ackroyd said, "and who's going to run against him? I, for one, never voted for him and I don't think any of the others here did, either."

"Nothing to be done about it now," Childress said. "Harry, did you know Reilly was back?"

Peters nodded and studied the tip of his cigar. "Blame me if you want, Paul, but I stood back and let Reilly get four years." Childress's head came up quickly, and the marshal smiled. "I'm sure Reilly shot that man in self-defense. Elmer Loving was lying." He glanced at the sour cigar stub, went to the window and threw it into the street. Lighting a fresh one, he turned the air acrid with strong smoke.

He went on, "Reconstructing what happened that day, we know that Reilly discovered the raid on his herd a few hours after it happened, and began to trail. That unexpected snowfall helped, and at Winehaven's he found the steers bunched in a loading pen. There was an argument and this feller pulled a gun. Max Horgan was there, as well as Loving. Horgan went into the hills and couldn't be found to testify, but Loving did, and he lied. Personally I believe Seever had a finger in the pie, or he wouldn't have kept pushing for the rope. I tell you, gentlemen, Reilly saw something there at Herb Winehaven's that scared the pants off more than one man. I'm not at all sure that Reilly understands how important this is, or even realizes what it was, but when they knew he saw it they wanted to get rid of him."

"Seems funny you'd let Reilly go to the pen," Murdock said.

"Getting him off the hook wouldn't make him remember what he saw. It was not a big thing, I'm sure." Peters shook his head. "I'd say it was a common, everyday thing, but once a man got his hands on it and thought about it, a lot of the answers would fall into place."

Al Murdock became keenly attentive. "You got something in mind, Harry?"

"Yes. We need a man to get in there and slug it out with Herb Winehaven's bunch."

"Reilly?"

Peters nodded. "He's got a record now,

and it might be he won't make a go of it on his own place. Right now he has as much to lose as any of you."

"I don't like it," Murdock said bluntly. "I'm not takin' Reilly's side, but the man's going to be my brother-in-law one of these days and I draw a line on what's fair and what isn't. You leave him alone, Peters."

Raising both hands, Peters said, "Now don't jump down my throat. I just made a suggestion. When Burk married Sally Isham that opened up a lot of trouble for Reilly, because he never liked to take a licking from anyone. And Burk's handed out a couple of others in the past." Peters gave Murdock a direct glance. "I'm in sympathy with you, Al, but I didn't mean to throw Reilly to the wolves. Gentlemen, law enforcement is a coldly methodical profession, following strict rules and affording mutual protection for innocent and guilty alike."

"A rope and a Winchester in the right places," Ackroyd observed, "would do a lot of good."

"Yes," Peters said, "it would make you the lawless and I'd have to come after you. I wouldn't like it, but I'd come." He shook his head. "No, the matter must be handled through a court of law. Nothing less will satisfy me."

"You ought to quit marshaling and run for sheriff," Childress said. "We need a man like you, Harry."

Peters blushed. "Very complimentary, but I'm satisfied with what I'm doing."

"What about Reilly?" Murdock asked.

Peters removed his cigar from his mouth and pulled at his bottom lip. "We'll play it straight. Let Burk Seever and his crowd make the first move against Reilly. Burk won't give up. He wants Reilly dead."

The meeting broke up with a murmur of conflicting opinions. Harry Peters shook hands all around before they filed out. Murdock and Childress were the last to leave.

Al paused to ask, "What kind of a man are you, Harry? I've known you for ten years and I still haven't figured you out."

Peters placed his cigar in the corner of his mouth and smiled. "Right now, a sleepy man." Murdock and Childress turned, and Peters stood in the doorway to watch them walk down the stairs.

Closing the door, he laid his cigar on the dresser. He removed his coat and rolled up his sleeves to wash his hands and face. His gun harness hung under his left armpit in a spring holster. It popped when he removed the gun, a .38-caliber Smith & Wesson sheriff's model with a shortened barrel. Laying this on a chair by his bed, he placed his hunting-case watch beside it before snuffing out the lamp.

Springs squeaked as he settled himself for the night, and through the walls the sounds of the town came faintly.

BECAUSE it was her job, Jane Alford had circulated among the tables, but several times she raised her head and looked toward the bar where Ernie Slaughter stood. She had seen Reilly Meyers leave, and soon after that Burk Seever. She had paid particular attention to Burk's face when he returned. Then Bob Ackroyd had come in, only to leave immediately with Jim Buttelow and Al Murdock. The fight outside had been going strong, but she had paid no attention to it. She watched the batwing doors winnow after Ackroyd, then left the main floor and went to a door leading through the back room to the alley.

The night was cool and the sounds coming from the saloon were muffled and somehow far away. She leaned against the rough wall and breathed deeply as though her lungs were sick from breathing the odors of spilled beer and cigar smoke.

From the gap between the saloon and the hardware store a slight rattle came to her. Then a man emerged, swinging his head left and right before he picked up the reflected light from her dress.

She started to move away from the wall, then sagged back when Ernie Slaughter said, "Jane? Wait." He moved past some stacked beer barrels, a tall man with a voice as cool as the night wind.

Jane said, "Get out of here, Ernie, before you get hurt."

"Don't play tough with me, Jane. I know what's beneath the paint."

"Do you?" She laughed softly. "You're

a *boy,* Ernie. You don't know anything."

When he stepped close to her she raised a hand and placed it against his chest, but his hands on her bare arms pulled her to him, and his lips held hers for a long moment. Finally she broke away from him, and when she spoke her voice was ragged and her breathing disturbed. "You kiss like a boy too."

"You're lying, Jane," he said softly. "Why do you keep lying? What happened to us?"

"There never was anything there," she said quickly. "You're a boy and you're filled with a lot of foolish notions." She put the smile back on her lips. "I wanted a little fun—some money. Don't feel sad for me, Ernie. I'm not complaining."

"You changed your mind too suddenly," Ernie said. "Reilly went to the pen and right after that you changed your mind." He reached for her again, but she shifted and he dropped his hand. "What's the connection, Jane? I want to know."

She became angry then and pushed against him with stiffened arms. "Get away from me! You always want to know everything. Can't a girl keep anything to herself? You come around like a sick calf. Fun with me comes high, cowboy—remember that."

"You don't mean that," Ernie said, his voice bleak.

She laughed at him, her voice lifting against the silence in the alley. "Grow up, Ernie. You want a wife so you can raise fat kids. That's not for me."

"I see," he said, and touched her arm.

She lifted her hand quickly and slapped him across the face. "Get away from me, Ernie. I mean it!"

"All right," he said softly and turned down the alley, making his slow way past the litter of boxes and junk.

She stood there watching him and the pale night light fell on her face, glistening in the streaks of moisture that ran down her cheeks.

The back door of the saloon opened and Burk Seever came out, his bulk magnified in the darkness. Raising a hand quickly, Jane Alford wiped her face.

"You sure can handle 'em, honey," Burk said. "I heard through the door."

"Is that all you've got to do?" Her shoulders stiffened, but her voice was smooth. "Did you see Ackroyd leave with Murdock and Buttelow?"

"Yes. They'll talk and beat their brains out, but they won't get anywhere." He touched her bare shoulders in a caress and she stood there motionless, waiting for his hands to move away. But they slid past her breasts and around her waist. "Better get inside," he told her.

"You go first," Jane said, presenting her back to him. "What about Reilly, Burk? What if he remembers? Surely he will."

"Don't worry about it," Seever murmured, and touched his lips to her neck. "You just keep your mouth shut around Ernie Slaughter. You want to see that kid now and then, don't you?"

"Do you have to keep asking me?"

"Just don't want you to forget," Seever said, and bit her ear gently.

She shrugged, pushing his face away. "Not now," she said. "You've got a wife of your own."

"I like variety," Burk said, and slapped her on the rounded hip.

He moved away from her then, and when the back door closed on him she was alone. She stood there, hands pressed flat against her open mouth, while tears broke past the dam of her closed eyelids.

Her lips moved and in her voice, though barely a whisper, was a desperate prayer. "Ernie—Ernie, help me!"

THE hour was late when Reilly Meyers arrived at his ranch southeast of Buckeye. After turning his horse into the barn he trudged across the littered yard, kicking empty tin cans and cursing his unwelcome tenants for leaving such a mess behind.

When he entered the darkened house and tried to close the door, it came off the hinges. This added to his aggravation. Disgusted when he saw the filthy floors, he went outside again and spread his blankets on the porch. The night wind carried a thin chill and he inched closer to the wall

to break the flow of air around him.

A sleeping man cannot always say what brings him awake. Perhaps there is no sound at all, but the instinct for survival is strong, preceding sound, almost a metaphysical force that brings a man upright in his blankets, instantly awake.

The dawn was not far away, and a faint light was rinsing away the blackness when Reilly came awake. He stopped all movement when he saw the sheriff sitting across from him, a .56-caliber Spencer balanced across his knees.

Sheriff Jack Henderson was near fifty, wrinkle-faced, with a mustache sagging past the corners of his mouth. A star peeked from beneath the lapel of his coat.

When Reilly threw his blanket aside, Henderson said, "Be careful there," and pulled Reilly's handgun away with his toe. "I'd hate to shoot you because you got careless."

Reilly sat up and tugged on his boots. Henderson had already picked up Reilly's rifle. "I like the dawn to take a man," Henderson was saying. "He's lazy then, and his mind's full of sleep."

"What the hell do you want with me?"

"Comes under the heading of unfinished business," Henderson said, a smile creasing his full lips. "You're a man with a record, Reilly, and as the sheriff I've got to ask you a few questions."

"Go ahead and ask 'em."

"We'll go into town to my office," Henderson said. "These things always take time. You know how the law is." He stood up, flourishing his rifle. "Let's not waste any time now, though."

With the sheriff's rifle covering him, Reilly saddled the buckskin and made up his blanket roll. Once Reilly's guns were secured to the sheriff's saddlehorn, the sheriff mounted and indicated for Reilly to move out ahead of him. The sheriff kept his horse at a walk five paces behind.

After a short silence he said, "If you had been smart, you would never have come back here. There are some folks around that think you want to make trouble."

"Why don't you get off my back?"

"Me?" Henderson laughed. "I'm a public servant, Reilly. When a man wants another one brought in, then I have to do it. Nothing personal, you understand."

"Like hell," Reilly said.

Henderson laughed again, then they finished the trip in silence. Riding down the main street, Henderson stayed behind Reilly, his rifle loosely held. They turned into a short side street and Reilly dismounted. The sheriff unlocked the door and stepped aside for Reilly to enter ahead of him.

The outer office was a dingy room with one barred window, furnished with an oak desk and several chairs. Henderson racked Reilly's rifle and put the revolver in the desk drawer, then herded him toward a cell facing an open lot.

Reilly paused as Henderson swung the cell door open and said, "You don't have a thing on me and you know it. What's this all about?"

"Spitting in the street," Henderson said. "What difference does it make? We'll find something that will stick."

"You got it all figured out, haven't you?"

"Somebody has," Henderson said, and locked the door.

LOOKING through the barred window, Reilly could observe a large section of the main street beyond a vacant lot. The morning sun climbed higher, and by noon the air was thick with heat. There were two bunks in the cell, the bottom one occupied by a young man who snored on, his head thrown back, half-in, half-out of the bed. After listening to this for an hour, Reilly raised a foot and gave the young man a shove.

The snoring sputtered to a halt and Reilly's cellmate sat up, scrubbing a hand over his face. There was a long split in his scalp, and dried blood matted his hair.

"Wow!" he said. "I don't remember it, but it must have been a glorious night." He stood up, staggered to the barred door, and rattled it until Henderson came back. "How about some water in here?"

The sheriff nodded and went away, returning in a few minutes with a gallon bucket. He unlocked the door, set the pail

inside, then snapped the lock again and went down the hall to his office.

The young man poured half the water over his head, then stood dripping. He looked at Reilly for a moment, then said, "I'm Milo Bucks, friend. Don't I know you from somewhere?" He didn't wait for an answer, just poured more water over his head. He set the bucket aside and said, "Sure, the hardware store. You weren't in here when I got tossed in, were you?"

"No," Reilly said, and nodded toward the split scalp. "Door knob?"

"Gun barrel," Bucks said, and grinned. "There was a beautiful fight, but the sheriff broke it up." He sat down on the bed and reached for the bucket, drinking until it was empty. "That was selfish of me. You thirsty?"

"It can wait. You new around here?"

"Just passing through," Bucks stated. "It's too bad I didn't. After I saw the elephant, it wasn't as pretty as I thought it was going to be." He sighed. "Like a woman's kiss, a mystery until you've kissed her, then quickly forgotten."

He looked at Reilly and his young face turned serious. Milo Bucks was one of those homely men who are not homely at all because a smile is always near the surface of their eyes.

"You didn't say what your name was," Bucks said.

Reilly told him, looking out the window. This was Saturday, he recalled, and traffic was brisk. All the families from outlying ranches and homesteads were in town for supplies and talk.

After awhile, Henderson came back with two plates of stew, shoving them beneath the door. The two prisoners ate in silence, and when they were through pushed the plates into the hall. Reilly rolled a smoke and passed the sack of tobacco to Milo Bucks.

The front door opened in the office and and Reilly looked around in time to see Tess Isham come in and speak briefly to Sheriff Henderson. The sheriff came down the hall with Tess following him.

"Talk through the bars. Five minutes."

After he went back to the office, Tess said, "I'm sorry, Reilly, but I was afraid something like this would happen."

"I haven't done anything," he said. "They can't hold me. Go on, get out of here, Tess. This is no place for you."

She gripped the separating bars until her knuckles turned white. "Reilly, this isn't anything to joke about. Don't you understand that Burk, through Henderson, can reach out and take what he wants?"

"So that's what happened."

"I'm not sure," she said in a heavy whisper. "Peters was having lunch with Childress and Murdock as I came over. They know Henderson has you, but Childress wants to stay out of it."

"I figured it would be that way," Reilly said softly.

"Harry Peters *could* get you out of here, but he refused to interfere. Reilly, isn't there something you can do?"

"Not for awhile," Reilly said, and folded his hands over hers as they gripped the bars. "Thanks for coming, Tess."

She gave him a brief smile. "Someone had to, Reilly."

He released her hands and, putting his arms through the bars, took her face gently between his palms. She read his intent and said, "No, Reilly!" But he pulled her face close and kissed her, the cold bars pressed against their cheeks. "Darn you, Reilly," she said and turned away, to hurry down the corridor.

HENDERSON let her out and went back to his desk, hidden from Reilly's view by the angle of the wall.

"Wow!" Bucks said. "For a filly like that I could stand this flea-trap for six months." He nudged Reilly. "Here comes Heavy Foot again."

Pausing at the cell door, Henderson produced a ring of keys and swung the door open. "All right, sonny," he said to Bucks. "Get out of here and the next time don't stick your nose in where it doesn't belong."

Picking up his hat, Milo moved past Reilly. "Luck," he said and went out.

After Bucks had left the jail, Henderson said, "Let's go, Reilly," and followed him to the office. Waving him into a chair,

Henderson took a position behind his desk and waited. In a few minutes Burk Seever came in, wearing a new suit. His collar was stiffly starched and a flowing ascot tie was tucked into a double-breasted vest.

"I see you let that meddling kid out," he said. He gave the sheriff no more than a glance, then turned his attention to Reilly. "I'm willing to be reasonable with you, Reilly, but I want you to get out of this country and no fooling around about it, either."

A grin broke out across Reilly's face as he glanced from Seever to the sheriff, and back to Seever. "Go to hell, Burk. You may run the sheriff's office, but you sure don't run me."

"You're going to make this tough on yourself," Seever began, and stopped short, swiveling his head around as the front door opened. Milo Bucks stepped inside. He closed it gently behind him and leaned against it, his young face smooth and vaguely interested.

"Am I interrupting something?"

Henderson frowned and glanced at Burk Seever, who glared at Milo Bucks. "What the hell do you want?"

"I got a six-shooter in that drawer there," Bucks said, pointing to Henderson's desk. "There was a slip-up and the sheriff forgot to give it back."

"I got no gun that's yours," Henderson said flatly.

Milo Bucks smiled. "I was sure out cold when I was dragged here last night and I've been locked up ever since, which is my way of saying I wouldn't know what was in that desk. However, if you'd run your hand around in there easy-like, I reckon you'd find my gun."

"Get out of here!" Henderson bellowed, half rising from his chair. "What do you think you're pulling?"

"This, I guess," Bucks said, and removed his right hand from behind him. In his fist was a small derringer, the over and under barrels staring at the sheriff. "Always keep this little friend in my saddlebag," Milo said. "Now, Sheriff, if you'll open that drawer real careful, you'll find a short-barreled forty-four Colt there with a pretty pearl handle. Just lay it on the floor and slide it to where I'm standing."

He smiled pleasantly and Henderson reached into the drawer. The gun was there, and he slid it toward Milo Bucks, who stooped and picked it up. He put the two-shot away and held the .44 loosely.

"Won this at Klamath Falls last year. Seems that every sheriff who's seen it wants it for his very own." He nodded to Seever and opened the door. "I'll be thanking you gentlemen," he added, and was outside, the closed door between them.

"That wise young punk," Henderson said, and shifted in his chair.

"Forget about him," Seever snapped, paying all his attention to Reilly Meyers. "Now listen good to me, Reilly. I'm not suggesting that you do a damn thing. *I'm telling you.* I won't fool with you."

"Were you ever fooling, Burk?"

"Get smart with me and I'll smash your face," Seever said threateningly. "You haven't got an ax handle now." He rolled his heavy shoulders. "Hating you is easy, Reilly. The nice part of it is that you've given me a good excuse, one that any man can understand—a woman. Every time I look at my wife I can think of you and know how you used to eat out of the dish I wanted. I can blame it all on your damned laughing ways, and how a man can sweat his brains out wanting something and you can come along and smile and she falls into your arms. In your case, I can get the job done and never explain anything, because any man can add two and two and get the answer about you and Sally."

"Well," Reilly murmured, "you've turned into a first-class sharpie, haven't you, Burk?"

SEEVER moved with surprising agility for a man his size, knocking Reilly out of the chair and splintering it under him. Reilly struck the floor rolling, an odd roaring in his ears and a deadness in the left side of his face.

He heard Seever's soft-soled shoes whisper on the floor as the big man closed in.

Sheriff Henderson half raised himself from his chair as though debating whether

to interfere or not. When he relaxed back into the chair, his decision to stay clear of this was obvious.

Rolling to his hands and knees, Reilly settled there for a moment, blood dripping from his nose onto the worn wood floor.

"Better lay off him, Burk," Henderson said, but there was no push behind his words, no real desire to stop this fight.

"Keep your nose out of it if you're scared," Seever said.

Reilly began to edge away as the big man's shoes shuffled on the floor. Reilly regained his feet in time to be knocked against the wall. A rifle shook loose from the rack and tumbled down noisily.

Shaking his head, Reilly tried to clear the fog that taxed his strength, raising a hand to touch his bruised cheek. There was no feeling in his face, just sickness gripping his stomach like a clamp.

As yet Seever had not hit him with all his strength, but the power in the man's arms was bone-crushing.

Grabbing Reilly by the shirt front, Seever pulled the smaller man forward. But Reilly uncorked a fist and smashed Burk flush in the mouth. Blood spurted and Seever roared. He was hurt, but not enough to relax his grip. He blocked Reilly's next punch and hit Reilly twice, snapping his head back with each blow.

Kicking out, Reilly's boot connected with the big man's shin, and for a relaxed second there was a chance to get free. He twisted away, spearing Seever again with a knotted fist, at the same time ducking the man's windmilling arms.

With new confidence Reilly stepped in close and tried to put the big man down. Seever had bull strength, though, and absorbed punishment without effect. He drove Reilly backward across the sheriff's desk and onto the floor beyond. Reilly had the will to rise, but his legs refused to obey the mental command. When sickness began to plow through him he knew it would not be long before this fight was lost, as all other fights with Seever had been.

Understanding this himself, Seever began to move forward. As Reilly put out his hand to push himself erect he felt the barrel and magazine tube of a rifle, and folded his fingers around it. The cool feel of the metal gave his flagging strength a boost and he stood up, reversing the rifle until it pointed at Burk Seever. "You want one of these in the gut, Burk?"

Reilly leaned back against the wall and looked at Seever. Henderson remained at his desk, his big hands flat on the top. There was no sound in the room except labored breathing.

Henderson made some vague motion and the rifle shifted to him. Whatever the sheriff had in mind vanished and once more he was perfectly still.

Seever said, "You yellow—"

Reilly was recovering somewhat from the pounding. He said, "In a minute, Burk, in a minute. I'll fight you, but let's get this thing even."

Putting a hand behind him, Reilly fumbled along the wall until he found the rifle rack. He grabbed one of Henderson's guns from the wall and tossed it to Seever.

"You'll have to take a chance on it's being loaded," Reilly said, and lowered the muzzle of his rifle to the floor. "Now you do as you please, Burk."

"My fists have always been good enough," Seever said. "I don't like guns."

"Fight or turn tail," Reilly said. "I won't wait long for you to decide."

"Let's fight," Seever said, and swung the rifle like an ax.

The move caught Reilly unprepared. He had barely raised the barrel of his own rifle when Seever's gun caught it with enough force to numb his arms.

THE thin metal of the magazine tube split, spewing blunt-nosed cartridges on the floor. The two men came against each other, fighting for an opening. The sound of barrel upon barrel was a loud clashing. Then Reilly swung the butt stock in a sideward sweep that caught Burk on the shoulder, knocking him halfway across the room.

Without hesitation Reilly followed, the rifle reversed and now gripped by the barrel. Seever tried to get up, raising his own gun to block Reilly's down-sweeping weap-

on. The stock broke and the piece struck Seever on the head, bring bright blood.

The big man rolled, striking out at Railly, but the blow was not true, catching Reilly on the hip and half spinning him around. But it gave Seever a chance to get to his feet and they both swung together, the barrels whacking each other with enough force to bend them slightly.

There was a cartridge under the lowered hammer of Burk's gun, and the sudden impact touched it off. The room bloomed with light for a moment, roared with sound. Henderson gave a frightened yelp as a foot-long gouge appeared across his desk top, followed by shattering glass as the bullet escaped through the front window.

The suddenness stunned Seever. Reilly caught him in the stomach with a back-handed swing, bringing the man double. He raised the battered gun to hit Seever across the head, but the big man dropped his weapon and locked his arms around Reilly's middle, lifting him off the floor.

Seever slammed Reilly into the wall with enough force to rattle the door. Pawing for Seever's face, Reilly tried to break free. His breathing was all but cut off.

Backing up again, Seever slammed him into the wall once more, this time lowering his head and ramming Reilly in the mouth. For a second Reilly relaxed completely; he no longer had strength. Then Seever dropped him and brought up a knee, catching him flush in the chest.

Reilly was lifted clear of the floor and flung backward. He struck heavily, and when he tried to work his elbow under him to rise he found he could not move.

Seever swayed toward him, mumbling softly to himself. He continued a slow shuffling advance, while Reilly tried to rally muscles that were too tired to obey.

(To Be Continued in the Next Issue)

KNOW YOUR WEST

1. The site of historic Ft. McKinney is located on Clear Creek some four miles west of the cow town of Buffalo, in what state?

2. Col. "Poppy" Miller founded what famous ranch in Oklahoma?

3. Once a Texas bartender, Ben Daniels, appointed by President Theodore Roosevelt, served ably as U. S. Marshall for what two territories, now adjoining states?

4. What once rollicky Rocky Mountain city is now known as the Carnation Capital of the world?

5. What were the "dugways" on oldtime cattle trails?

6. Whether guilty or not, what rather famous oldtime cowboy and range detective was hanged at Cheyenne in 1903 for the killing of a 15-year-old boy who happened to be wearing his father's hat and coat at the time?

7. What do the following well known westerners do for a living: Everett E. Colborn, Col. Jim Eskew, Lynn Beutler, Ken Roberts, Harley Roth, Don Gilmore, and Leo J. Creamer?

8. The Sawatch Range is rated as the highest in what many-mountained state?

9. What, in cow ranch terminology, is a long yearling?

10. The famous Tonto Basin or Pleasant Valley Range War in which the Grahams and Tewksburys were shooting enemies, smoked up what territory, now a state?

—Rattlesnake Robert

You will find the answers to these questions on page 99. Score yourself 2 points for each question you answer correctly. 20 is a perfect score. If your total is anywhere from 16 to 20, you're well acquainted with the customs and history of the cow country. If your total score is anywhere from 8 to 14, you will have things to learn. If you're below 8, better get busy polishing up your knowledge of the West.

Lady Bronc

OUT in the Rock Hill Rodeo arena a slim, golden-haired girl in a blue silk shirt was climbing on a little broom-tailed bronc snubbed tight to a big, red-faced cowboy's saddlehorn. Watching the procedure from over near the roping chutes, bald-headed Buttermilk Bates considered it a most unfitting moment for his young friend and fellow rodeo hand, Cleve Travis, to be scribbling calculations in a notebook.

"You're missing the sights, cowboy," said Buttermilk. "If that isn't the prettiest cowgal this side of Halifax, I'll quit looking."

"One would do me for a while, I reckon," mumbled the brown-haired younger cowboy, chewing on his pencil. "But sooner or later I'll want one for the main house, one for the haystack camp, probably one in reserve up on the Mesa, and another one—"

"Who do you think you are, buster?" broke in Buttermilk. "Only last week I heard you claiming you weren't interested in women, and now here you are counting up your woman-requirements like one of those sheet-wearing sheiks."

"Windmills, not women, you lunkhead!" Cleve's wide, good-humored mouth broke out a brief grin which gave way to a mild frown as he viewed the proceedings in front of the grandstand. "Speaking of women, what does old Perry think he's putting on here, a cowboy contest or a beauty parade? Why doesn't he get on with the rodeo?"

"One little female bronc-riding exhibition won't damage the rodeo any, Cleve," Buttermilk chided. "Perry's got to throw in a few fancy specials to please the crowd."

Cleve Travis shrugged. It was none of his business how many exhibition acts old Perry Tanner wanted to sandwich in between the actual contesting. But loading up the show with too much of that stuff sometimes didn't leave enough for all the calf roping each afternoon. Then it would have to be run off the next morning—and Cleve had other use

Rider

By S. OMAR BARKER

The bronc kicked high and hard, and the girl rode him well

CLEVE FOUND THAT winning the calf-roping contest would be easy . . . compared to tangling with a hotheaded girl who had as many feminine tricks up her sleeve as Jessie. . . .

for his mornings. By getting up before daylight his old flivver could get him out to the ranch and back by afternoon rodeo time, and still allow him an hour or so in which to work at patching up dilapidated corrals and sheds.

LAWYER LAYTON, who had made out the purchase papers on the ranch, had called the place "a monument to drought, destitution, desolation and neglect." But Cleve, a little tired of rodeoing, saw it as the promising nucleus of his future. He recalled that the original homesteader had deserted the ranch after his shack had burned down eight or ten years ago. Later it had become a part of the now-defunct H Bar D outfit for which he himself had ridden awhile, as a raw youngster. The H Bar D had built some corrals and sheds on the ranch to use as a camp, but even these had now gone pretty much to pot.

It had taken almost every dollar of his savings from six hard, but successful, years of rodeo contesting to buy the place. Now he was counting heavily on big winnings in this rodeo to start putting the ranch in shape to live on, and to run the few cattle he had contracted for on borrowed capital.

Wanting—needing—so badly to win all the prize money he could had put him a little on edge, and now, waiting for this Oklahoma girl to put on what he considered a mere circus-act bronc-riding exhibition, Cleve felt himself churning with impatience to get the whole darned rodeo over with and get started ranching.

He noticed with only mild interest that the bay bronc bucked high and hard, without much side-twist, and that the girl rode him straight up and well. But when the bucking had dwindled to mere kickups, and she swept off her big white hat to acknowledge the cheers from the grandstand, the bronc suddenly started pitching again, this time in a crazy whirligig, and the girl rider was in trouble.

She had already lost one stirrup and half of her balance when Cleve's fast dun roping pony got there, ahead of anybody else. Cleve got hold of the cotton rope bucking rein and snubbed it tight to his saddle horn, yanking the bronc's head up so that a little harmless kicking up was all he could possibly do.

He reached out a long, strong arm to lift the girl from the saddle. For an instant she leaned toward him as if to accept the take-off, then drew back suddenly as her blue eyes met his dark ones.

"Turn me loose!" she flared. "I want no help from the likes of you, Cleve Travis."

At about that instant the big cowboy who had snubbed her bronc spurred up along the other side. He leaned from the saddle to lift her off over there, and somehow it made Cleve Travis mad. Offering pick-up-service to any rider in trouble was nothing more than a common courtesy of the arena, and to have such a courtesy rudely refused by a girl he didn't even know riled him considerably.

Instead of turning the girl loose, he clamped his arm around her tighter, swerved his horse away, and lifted her willy-nilly off the bronc and over onto his own horse. By giving him the cooperation usual at such a time the girl could easily have swung herself safely astride behind his saddle. By *not* giving it, she found herself more or less seated on Cleve's upper thigh, held solidly there by the arm he kept clamped tight around her waist while he used his other hand to turn the little bay bronc's hackamore rein loose from his saddlehorn.

"Put me down," gasped the girl. "Darn you, put me down!"

That was exactly what Cleve Travis intended to do as soon as the bay bronc's departure would make it safe; but at this moment the big, rawboned, ruddy-faced cowboy had to put in his unwelcome oar.

"You heard the lady, cowboy," he bellowed. "Turn her loose!"

"Go suck an egg," said Cleve. He spurred his horse a few yards away to one side. There he neatly and very firmly stood the girl down on her own feet and politely tipped his hat. Then he turned to face the big man, whose name, he now remembered, was Dunk Northway, and the taffy-haired young cowboy who had followed him.

YOUR name Travis?" Dunk Northway stuck out his big jaw and there was an ugly sound to his voice. "Hereafter you keep your dirty hands off this young lady, or there'll be trouble."

"Then maybe we'd better have a little of it right now," retorted Cleve, and socked Dunk Northway smack on the front end of his rather large nose. Old Perry Tanner, the arena director, got there before it had time to grow into much of a fight.

"Extemporaneous fisticuffs aren't on the program, boys," he informed them dryly. "Dunk, you're coming up in the calf roping. Get on your horse and get to the chute."

Cleve watched the golden-haired girl and the taffy-haired young puncher, who looked like he might be her brother, pilot a protesting Dunk Northway to his horse. Then he got on his own.

As they rode out of the arena to line up behind the calf chutes for the roping, Buttermilk Bates said, "Fighting over a girl who's already done spoken for isn't smart."

"I wasn't fighting over the girl," Cleve said. "I hit that jasper because I didn't like the tone of voice he spoke to me with."

"Sure." Buttermilk grinned. "But I noticed you kept a pretty good grip on the girl for quite a spell. How do you grade her: medium, choice or fancy?"

"Look here, Buttermilk," Cleve said, reddening a little, "if you weren't twice my age and only about two-thirds my size, I'd have half a notion to sock you one on the nose too, just for talking so freely about a lady—even if I don't even know who she is."

"She's Jessie Bondell on the program," Buttermilk informed him. "And Dunk seems to be acting as her manager. Say, wasn't that cucklebur patch you're buying once called the old Bondell place?"

"Maybe it was." Cleve shrugged. "Looks like I'm next up in this calf roping. See you when the dust settles."

It was several hours before the dust had much chance to settle in the Rock Hill arena that afternoon. The rodeo was not as smoothly handled and well-organized as it might be, but old Perry Tanner managed to push the show along with plenty of zip.

Whenever he wasn't contesting, Cleve Travis either lent a helping hand around the chutes or else squatted on his boot heels with other ranch-hand cowboys along the fence, swapping cow, grass and weather talk, plus an occasional comment on whatever contestant happened to be dusting up the arena at the moment.

The slim girl named Jessie Bondell did a rope-spinning act that was only fair for skill, but she got a big hand just the same, especially from the cowpunchers around the chutes. She was pretty all right, and apparently the cowboys all found her mighty easy to look at. But it was big Dunk Northway who seemed to have his claim staked out on her attentions.

He and the girl and her hollow chested, taffy-haired brother stayed pretty much to themselves. Several times Cleve caught their eyes on him, and once he was sure he heard Northway speak his name. But he carefully avoided going near them. No use mussing up Perry's rodeo with another ruckus. Yet his recollection of the look of something close to hatred in the girl's eyes when he had started to lift her off that bronc still puzzled and bothered him.

AS THE second go-round of the bronc riding got under way, old Buttermilk Bates came and squatted down beside him.

"I've been inquiring into a few historical facts, cowboy," he reported. "This Dunk Northway is said to be a right mean hombre with a sixshooter—and he doesn't want anyone stealing his girl."

"Lucky I'm not in the girl stealing business," said Cleve. "What are you trying to do, Buttermilk, throw a little scare into me?"

"He isn't very contented over you poking him in the nose and beating him a full second in the calf roping, either," went on Buttermilk. "If I were you I'd—wup, that's him coming out of Chute Six right now."

They stood up to watch the ride. The blaze-faced bay bronc came out squealing and squalling. He pitched high and hard, but with no more side-twist than a freight train on a stretch of straight track, and he

wasn't much harder to ride. Yet the bronc's wild squalling, plus the way Northway whooped and yelled and slapped him with his hat, made it look like a hell-for-leather ride. The grandstand roared its applause.

"He's a money rider, Buttermilk," said Cleve. "Judges'll score him 80 or better on that one."

"Twenty for riding, sixty for show-off," grumbled Buttermilk. "If you can't beat that, buster, you'd better take up knitting!"

"I've contested in rodeos where it didn't matter much, but this time I need every dollar I can win," said Cleve soberly. "I sure wish you'd throw in with me on this ranching business, Buttermilk. It's liable to be tough for a while but—"

"I never did like combing out cuckleburs, cowboy. Say, isn't that your ride they're calling?"

The horse Cleve had drawn was a broad-built black named Boghole. The cowboy was starting to ease down on him, when he saw the big blue eyes of Jessie Bondell gravely watching him from over the far side of the chute. On a sudden impulse he grinned at her.

"Wish me luck. I'm liable to need it!"

"I hope he breaks your neck," said the girl.

What gave Cleve a puzzled shock was that she sounded almost as if she really meant it. He came out of the chute wondering why this pretty girl he didn't even know should hate him. Boghole didn't lack much of throwing him before he could get his mind back on his business. After that he made a plain, methodical ride that didn't win him a very big hand from the grandstand, nor, as far as he could figure, a grade as high as Dunk Northway's in the judges' little black books.

To Cleve's and apparently everybody else's surprise, it was Jessie Bondell's scrawny, puny-looking brother who put on the real salty bronc ride that day. The little dun bronc called Cyclone lived up to his name, with some to spare. At every twist it looked as if skinny Ernie Bondell was on his way off, but somehow he stayed, and scratched out a wild ride that brought the grandstand roaring to its feet.

At the finish gun the youngster was spitting blood, but still up there scratching. Once during the whingding Cleve saw the kid lose a stirrup, then in the same second miraculously regain it. If either of the bronc-riding judges had seen it, Ernie Bondell would be disqualified—out of the money.

Evidently neither of them had. Their tallybooks rated that day's bronc riding: first money, Ernie Bondell; second, Dunk Northway; third, Bill Baker; fourth, Cleve Travis.

OUT at the rodeo stables Buttermilk Bates muttered cusswords.

"One hundred smackers the little squirt gets for losing a stirrup," he snorted. "I saw it, you saw it, Ed Potts saw it. If I were you, Cleve, I'd—"

"You'd keep your mouth shut, like I aim to. What the judges see they tally. What they don't see just didn't happen."

"Just the same—"

"Mr. Travis," Jessie Bondell's voice broke in, "Mr. Northway and my brother and I want to talk to you—privately—back of the stable."

"Those two lugs are laying for you with a couple of baseball bats, like as not," grumbled Buttermilk. "If you have no better sense than—"

"You never did hear me brag about my good sense, did you?" Cleve grinned. "At least maybe I'll find out why this high-chinned little lady hates me."

"As if you didn't already know!" Jessie Bondell's chin did go high then, sure enough.

Dunk Northway and Ernie Bondell were waiting back of the stable.

"Travis," Northway began at once, "you and I can settle our personal difficulties later. Right now we've got another little matter to settle."

"I'll do the talking, Dunk," broke in the girl firmly. She turned to Cleve. "Mr. Travis, you pretend you don't know me, but I think you do. Remember the homestead you drove my father and his family off when you were riding for the H Bar D?"

Cleve stared at the girl, then at her brother, and back at her again. Remembrance came tumbling back into his incredulous mind. Surely this pretty girl and her brother could not be the same barefooted nester kids who had thrown rocks at him the time he had suspected a certain nester of butchering H Bar D beef and had stopped by to warn him to cut it out.

Only eighteen then, but already a full-fledged cowhand on the big H Bar D spread, Cleve had been feeling sort of big for his britches, and had talked pretty rough to the homesteader. Two scrawny barefooted kids had thrown rocks at him as he rode away.

Riding back there a week later, intending to report to the homesteader that the real beef thief had been caught, and to apologize for having accused the nesters, Cleve had found the shack burned, the homesteader and his family gone. Cleve had felt sorry about it, but, being young, as well as a cowpuncher and loyal to the brand, he had considered homesteaders as intruders on legitimate H Bar D cow range anyhow. Any time one of them pulled out it was good riddance.

No investigation had ever been made as to who had burned those particular nesters out. An old cowboy had been hired by the H Bar D to file on the claim, and with the passing of eight or nine years Cleve had forgotten all about it. But if this girl thought, as she doubtless did, that he had had a hand in dispossessing them, it was no wonder she hated him. She must hate him even more now that he was aquiring the very land she believed he had helped the H Bar D drive her father off. Well, he certainly had had no part in burning them out, but he figured he could deny it now till hell froze over and this girl would never believe him.

"I'M SORRY, Miss Bondell," he said a little stiffly, "but it looks to me like you're barking up the wrong tree."

"Oh, no, she isn't," Dunk Northway began belligerently.

"*Dunk!*" This time the girl spoke sharply. "I told you I would do the talking. Mr. Travis, for reasons that need not concern you, my brother and I want my father's old homestead back. I know our claim to it probably won't stand up in law, but we'll buy it from you if we have to. Counting the money I figure Dunk and Ernie will win in this rodeo, we'll have enough."

"Rodeo winnings don't always pan out the way you figure," Cleve put in dryly. "Besides, the property you mention is not for sale."

"Then maybe we had better settle this deal right here and now." Dunk Northway's big right hand dropped to his sixgun. "Travis, either you deed over this land or—"

"Dunk!" Jessie Bondell laid a firm restraining hand on the big man's wrist. "Leave that gun in its holster. Can't you see Mr. Travis isn't armed?"

"I can get armed mighty pronto, Northway," said Cleve calmly, "if you would care to wait."

It took Cleve five minutes to get back with his six-shooter. Both Northway and young Ernie Bondell were gone, but the girl was still there, sitting on a bale of hay, crying.

Cleve touched her shoulder, meaning to try to say something to comfort or reassure her, but she struck his hand aside fiercely. He shrugged and went away.

On account of Dunk Northway's threats, Cleve considered wearing his gun downtown to the rodeo headquarters that evening, but decided not to. No use messing up old Perry's rodeo with that kind of trouble if he could help it. He hung around the headquarters bullpen a while, then wandered up to the cowboy's dance at the Armory. Almost the first thing he saw when he stepped inside was Jessie Bondell dancing with Dunk Northway.

She had on some kind of a flowered blue dress that he thought made her look mighty soft and delicate and dainty for a lady bronc rider. Just watching her put a feeling of warmth pulsing in his veins. He wished he could feel free to ask her to dance with him, to make friends with her if he could. But it stuck stubbornly in his mind that the three of them—Northway, the girl and her brother—were out to deprive him in one

way or another of the little ranch he had his heart set on keeping.

He did not want to renew the row with Northway here at the dance, but if the big lunk wanted trouble he didn't aim to sidestep it, either. He took his stand at the edge of the dance floor where Northway couldn't fail to see him, and near the open side door where it would be handy to step outside if the big cowboy wanted a ruckus. After a while, when he saw that Northway was obviously avoiding even looking at him, Cleve decided he might as well dance a round or two himself.

He was waltzing with Perry Tanner's red-headed daughter when somebody suddenly gripped his arm. He turned to meet Ernie Bondell's drunken scowl.

" 'Member me, Travish? Li'l ol' barefoot nester kid—time you burnt our shack? Ain't barefoot kid no more— Jus' step outside, thash all I ask, cowboy. Jus' step outshide."

"Take it easy, kid," said Cleve quietly. He piloted the drunk boy out the side door with as little fuss as possible, turning him over to Buttermilk and some other cowboy "stags" loafing there.

"This kid's been at the bottle, boys," Cleve told them. "I wish a couple of you would pilot him to his bed. I'd take him myself, but he doesn't seem to like me very well."

"Sure." Buttermilk grinned.

Ernie was still muttering drunken threats as they walked him up the street.

CLEVE almost collided with Jessie Bondell as he started back inside.

"My brother," she stammered, "I thought he—"

"He'll be all right by morning, ma'am. He's not the only young cowboy that ever got himself swizzled at a rodeo."

The girl didn't answer him, but he thought maybe the quick look she gave him was meant for thanks.

Cleve was glad he didn't find Northway again at the dance. That, whatever it might amount to, could wait. Right now, for the next two days, there was a rodeo on—a rodeo in which he was counting heavily on winning a good chunk of money.

The second day's contests made Cleve's chance at any of the big finals money begin to look a little thin. Despite his toot of the night before, young Bondell chalked up first in the bronc riding again, an Indian named Notah Jones second, Dunk Northway third, and Cleve Travis fourth. In the calf roping Dunk Northway shaded a Texas lariateer named Nugent by four-tenths of a second for first, and Cleve's time ran fifth, clear outside day money, but still leaving him possibly in the running for the final on three calves which was to be the big payoff of $500.

Cleve purposely kept away from Dunk Northway and the two Bondells, and they kept away from him. But that night, at the usual cowboy dance, Buttermilk Bates came waltzing by with Jessie Bondell where Cleve stood watching, and suddenly stopped.

"Excuse me, ma'am," Buttermilk said, "I got to see a boy about a pup. Why don't you and this cowboy try it awhile?"

Cleve saw hesitation in the girl's blue eyes. When he put his arm firmly about her slim waist and started right on with the waltz, he could feel the softness of her back muscles stiffen, but she didn't openly resist.

"Miss Bondell," said Cleve earnestly, as soon as he was sure she wasn't going to leave him, "I know you won't believe me, but I had nothing to do with burning your folks out on that homestead. All I did was—"

"Please, let's not talk about it," the girl said quietly. "And please understand that the only reason I'm dancing with you is because I didn't want to raise a public fuss —and I hope Dunk won't." The brief look she gave him left him puzzled.

By the time the waltz was over he was feeling shaky all over, for the first time in his life. It was by no means an unpleasant feeling. In her first exhibition bronc ride the next day, Jessie Bondell got pitched off. On foot at the chutes, Cleve saw it and ran out there, but she was already up when Dunk Northway and a pick-up man got to her and helped her, limping a little, from the arena.

When Cleve got back to the chutes, lawyer Layton, who also dealt in real estate, was waiting for him.

"You got a minute, Cleve?" he asked.

"Sure," said Cleve. "What's bothering you?"

Alone around back of the chutes Layton said, "I've got a buyer for your ranch."

Cleve shook his head. "It's not for sale." Then he added, "Who wants it?"

"A young lady who says she once lived there," Layton said. "She figures if she can get her brother out on a place like that and away from the rodeos, maybe she can wean him off the bottle."

"Who's putting up the money?"

"Well, a feller named Northway spoke to me about it. It seems he's got some kind of an agreement with the girl."

"The place is not for sale," Cleve broke in shortly, and walked over to his horse.

OFF toward the gear sheds, Dunk Northway's big roan roping horse shifted position, bringing two cowboys behind him suddenly in sight. Cleve saw the big one hand the skinny one a bottle which he lifted to his lips for a long drag, then stuck inside his shirt. The big cowboy slapped the other one on the shoulder, mounted and rode around toward the roping chutes. The skinny one sat down on a bale of hay and took another drink.

Double crossing the kid to get him thrown, thought Cleve. But it's none of my business. Nevertheless he went and found Jessie Bondell on the contestants' bleachers, her left arm in a bandanna sling.

He said, "If I were you I wouldn't let your brother try to ride a bronc today."

"Mr. Travis," said the girl, "will you please mind your own business?"

"He's drinking," said Cleve stubbornly. "He's liable to get his fool neck broken!"

"I don't believe it! Dunk promised to see that he didn't." Despite the spunky sound of her retort, Jessie Bondell's blue eyes didn't look far from tears. "You're just afraid he'll beat you again!"

"And another thing—" Cleve began, but when the girl turned her head away he let it go and went back to the chutes.

In the roping, Dunk Northway missed his calf entirely, knocking him out of the finals. Cleve Travis tied his in ten seconds flat, which held his total time on three calves down to 44.6 seconds—first money in the finals if Tex Nugent didn't tie in 12 seconds or less. Cleve was lacing his chaps for the bronc riding when the announcer called: "Tex Nugent's time, 11.4 seconds!"

"Second money isn't bad," observed Buttermilk Bates, "if a feller isn't thinking of getting married or something."

"Which I am not," said Cleve. "What I *am* going to do is take care of a skunk as soon as this rodeo is over. Buttermilk, what would you think of a big lunk that keeps himself in good with a girl by pretending he's helping her keep her weak-willed brother from drinking, then pouring whisky into him right before a bronc ride?"

"I'd think he's wasting good whisky," grunted Buttermilk. "But what for?"

"Wants to win the riding himself, I reckon. I've a notion to tell Perry the boy's drunk, Buttermilk, so he won't let him ride."

"If I were you, cowboy, I'd mind my own business. Listen, they're calling the bronc riders now."

That was the first year that the Rock Hill rodeo management had furnished standard bucking saddles, but each contestant still supervised the saddling up of his bronc. The saddle Cleve had ridden the first two days was No. 4. Now, checking its stirrup length, he noticed that the right stirrup was laced with a new, narrow thong that didn't look strong enough to suit him. Instead of yelling about it, though, he picked up another kak, found its stirrup length just right, and proceeded to lace it on the bronc he had drawn, a snaky black called Windmill Willie.

Windmill Willie lived up to his name. He came out way up in the air and whirling, but Cleve not only rode him, he "rode him proud." A second after the judge's gun signalled "ride finished," Cleve hit the ground, almost too dizzy to get up, but pretty doggone sure he had made a money ride.

At that same instant the gate of Chute

No. 2 swung prematurely open and out came Ernie Bondell on a squalling, bawling paint called Screw Driver. For two, three, four seconds the half-drunk cowboy made a fantastically wild ride, lurching considerably this way and that, but still on top.

Drunk or sober, puny-looking or not, it was plain that Ernie Bondell was a rider. Then all at once he lurched too far to the right, hit the ground head first, and lay still. To Cleve, just getting up from the ground himself, it looked as if the boy's right stirrup had suddenly given way.

EVEN as a doctor and men with a stretcher came hurrying into the arena, Cleve saw Dunk Northway spur his horse out to help the pick-up man get the saddle off the paint horse. It was a chore at which any contestant was likely to lend a hand, but this time it looked to Cleve Travis as if Northway was in a mighty big hurry about it.

Dizzy though he was, he managed to head off Northway at the utility gate at one end of the chutes, as he came lugging the saddle back.

"Let me take a look at that, Northway." For once Cleve Travis's quiet voice sounded pretty barbed-wirish.

"You go to hell!"

As Dunk stepped off his horse and started through the gate with the saddle, Cleve saw that the right stirrup dangled a good six inches longer than the left.

Cleve's first impulse was to grab for the saddle itself, but his second, born of accumulated wrath, was to have it out with the big cowboy. The swift reach of his left hand caught Northway's shirt and yanked him around. His right, knotted hard in a fist, popped the big cowboy's jaw like a sledge hammer on rock. With a grunt of rage, Northway swung the saddle at him, following it with a bull-like lunge that carried them both to the ground, with Northway on top.

He didn't stay there long. Somehow Cleve got that driving right fist loose and hit him again, this time hard on the nose, and Northway let go. Both men were up, squared away for battle, blood streaming from Northway's nose, when Perry Tanner and the arena judges suddenly got between them.

"I told you boys I wouldn't have any fighting!" old Perry said savagely.

"Take a look at that saddle," Cleve broke in quietly.

Buttermilk was already looking at it.

"Monkey business," he said. "Look, Perry!" He yanked at a piece of broken lacing and popped it in two like grocer's twine. "Good way to get a man thrown, isn't it?"

Perry Tanner's wind-weathered eyes glanced briefly at the broken stirrup lacing, then swept inquiringly around the circle of cowboys who had gathered around the ruckus. His face was grim.

"All right, boys," he demanded sharply. "Who pulled this dirty trick?"

For a second nobody answered, then a girl's quiet voice spoke out clearly.

"I saw Dunk Northway putting new lacing in one of the saddles, Mr. Tanner," she said, "but I didn't realize there was anything wrong about it—then."

It was the first time Cleve had realized that Jessie Bondell was standing right there, almost beside him. Now when he turned to look at her, her eyes met his steadily, and what it seemed to him he could see in them was anything but hate.

"Perry," he said, "I don't relish being a tattle-tale, but I think I know how this was. First Northway got the Bondell kid drunk to make sure *he'd* get thrown, then he doctored this saddle to get *me* dumped. Only I picked another saddle and the kid got this instead. I just didn't much like the looks of that new lacing. If I'd realized it was a weak string put there on purpose, I'd sure have told you about it."

"Tanner," broke in Dunk Northway, with a contemptuous shrug of his big shoulders, "it looks to me like this Cleve Travis is an even better liar than he is a bronc rider. Let's get on with this show. I've got a bronc ride coming up, remember?"

Perry Tanner was not a man to fool around with indecision. "We'll get on with the show, all right, Northway," he said dryly, "only *you* won't be in it!"

"The hell I won't!" Dunk wiped his bleeding nose. "I paid my entrance fees."

"You can have 'em back, but we don't allow skunks to contest at this show, once we smell 'em. Cleve, if you and this overgrown polecat want to finish your fight when the show's over, I'll be right on hand to referee it. Now clear the arena and let's get on with this rodeo before the grandstand walks out on us."

CLEVE turned to the girl.

"I'm sorry all this had to happen this way, Jessie," he said. "Is your brother badly hurt?"

"I don't think so. I ought to have gone with him, but when you and Dunk started fighting, I—I had to stay."

Bill Baker, coming out of Chute 6 on a bronc, interrupted her, and when she darted out through the gate toward the sheds where they had carried her brother, Cleve didn't follow.

No sense in making a fool of myself, he thought, but if Northway is still around when the show's over. . . .

There were several more unsuccessful bronc rides that left Cleve pretty sure his average score on three rides would pay first money, but right now he had something else on his mind. During the range relay race, final event of the rodeo, in which he wasn't entered, he went and hunted up lawyer Layton. At a soda pop stand under the grandstand they found a man who had an account book, and borrowed a blank sheet of paper out of it.

Hurrying back to the chutes to keep his date with Dunk Northway as the range relay wound up in a dusty finish, Cleve ran into Buttermilk Bates.

"You can stop thinking about a fight, buster," the grizzled old cowboy said. "Mr. Northway took off for parts unknown."

"Buttermilk," Cleve broke in soberly, "Have you seen Jesse Bondell around any place?"

"Who? Oh, you mean that little bronc-riding cutie with the baby blue eyes? Why, sure, she's out yonder in one of the sheds, where they carried her brother. He's fairly bad hurt, but he'll live. Hey, buster, what's your hurry?"

Cleve met the lady bronc rider he was looking for just coming out of one of the gear sheds out beyond the chutes.

"Miss Bondell," he said, handing her a folded paper, "this is a deed to the homestead your father never should have been run off in the first place. All the pay I ask for it is that you quit thinking badly of me for whatever part I may have had in it."

"I don't think badly of you any more anyway, Cleve Travis." The girl took the paper and tore it to bits. Her wide-set blue eyes met his with a look in them that he found it hard to believe—and impossible to misunderstand.

"Jessie," he said, speaking slowly to try to hide the urgent shakiness of his voice, "Could it maybe be *our* ranch—together, I mean?"

But by then the cowboy's arms were already tightening around her, and the lady bronc rider's half-parted lips were raised to his in an answer that needed no words.

KNOW YOUR WEST

(Answers to the questions on page 89)

1. Wyoming.
2. 101 Ranch.
3. New Mexico and Arizona.
4. Denver, Colo.
5. The trails or roads dug by trail drivers in the high banks of rivers to give their herds a "going in place" and "a coming out place" when crossing a stream, were called "dugways."
6. Tom Horn, the question of whose guilt is still controversial in the west.
7. Furnish livestock for, produce and direct rodeos.
8. Colorado.
9. In the cattle trade any calf between eighteen months and two years old is usually called a long yearling, but sometimes any calf over twelve months old but not yet twenty four is also so called.
10. Arizona.

The "Innocent" Killer

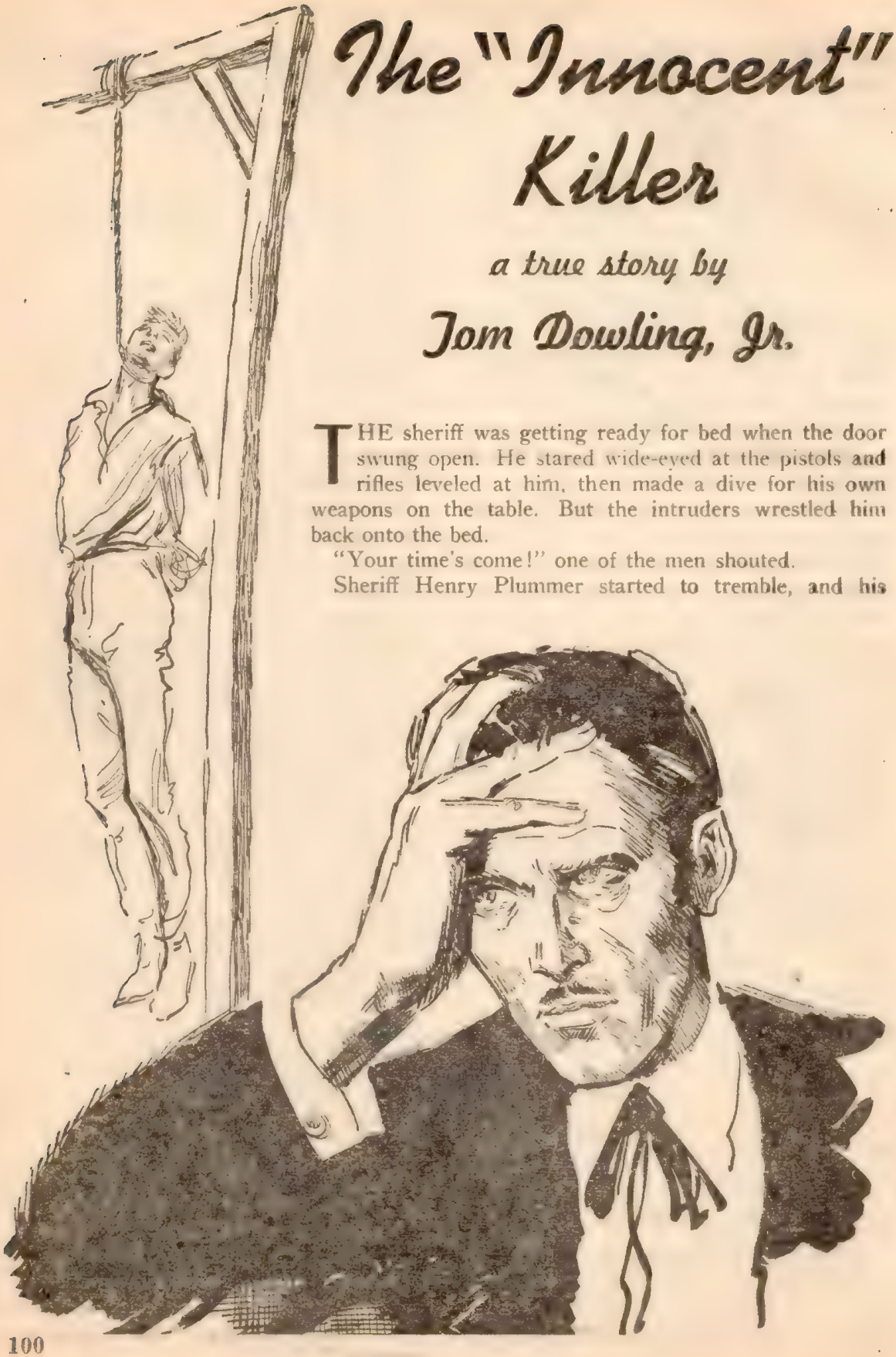
a true story by

Tom Dowling, Jr.

THE sheriff was getting ready for bed when the door swung open. He stared wide-eyed at the pistols and rifles leveled at him, then made a dive for his own weapons on the table. But the intruders wrestled him back onto the bed.

"Your time's come!" one of the men shouted.

Sheriff Henry Plummer started to tremble, and his



throat went dry. "No, boys," he pleaded, "don't hang me. Don't! Cut out my tongue. Cut off my ears and banish me, but please don't hang me!"

His cries for mercy fell on unhearing ears. The men shoved him through the door and hanged him on a gallows he himself had ordered built.

Thus came an end to a career of violence and cold-blooded cruelty. Henry Plummer died on January 10th, 1864, pleading for the mercy he had never shown others. His death was a big step toward the winning of the West, for while he lived he presented a great obstacle in the path of justice.

Plummer had a gift, if it could rightly be called that, for deceiving his fellow men. The murder in his heart was disguised always by his outward show of suave, gentlemanly manners.

History first records his public career in Nevada City, where he was marshal in 1856-7. A slim man, medium in height, he had brown hair and blue eyes and a very smooth gift of gab.

In an argument over a woman, Plummer killed a man and was sent to Yuba City, California for a seven-year prison sentence. But his cunning brought about a quick release. He convinced the authorities that he was dying of tuberculosis.

Two years later he was recognized as one of the most wanted criminals at large. Heading a large band of cutthroats, he wandered throughout California, murdering gold miners with an utter disregard for human life.

At length things got too hot for him in California and he moved his operations to Walla Walla, Washington, where he circulated a rumor that he had been lynched. The California authorities got this false word and scratched him off their list of wanted men. He was once more free to carry on his crimes.

Moving to Lewiston, Idaho, he formed another gang. In short order the town was in constant dread of the mob.

In 1863 Plummer rode into a place called Gold Creek, and it was here that he took up a new angle: deception and trickery.

A short while after his arrival in Gold Creek, he saw a man walking toward him and hurried out to meet him.

"Jack, you old codger, what're you doing here?" he asked, with a broad smile.

The man, Jack Cleveland, grinned back. "Henry! Well, this beats all." He shook the offered hand. "Reckon I'm running, just like you."

These two had been the leaders of the California gang, and after several hours of planning they decided to organize another gang in Gold Creek. But the association was short-lived, for they both fell in love with the same girl. Plummer's smooth talk won the lady and he married her. But it was a blow Cleveland could not take, and Henry Plummer had a formidable enemy in his former friend.

Plummer took his wife to a place named Bannuck, in Montana, where they settled down for two months before she discovered his true character and left him. But while he was unable to fool her, he certainly had Bannuck wrapped around his finger. In no time at all his gentlemanly attitude won him the admiration of all the townsfolk, even while he was plotting against them.

But then Jack Cleveland rode into town, and Plummer saw in him a menace to his growing empire. If he were to carry on here he would have to rid himself of this threat.

It appeared to be a fairly simple matter, since Cleveland was looked upon as a no-good. Plummer figured that if he kept a close watch on the man the opportunity would eventually present itself.

His patience was rewarded in Goodrich's Saloon one night, when Cleveland strode in and confronted a man who was playing cards with some others.

"Where's that dough you owe me, Perkins?" Cleveland snapped.

"Why, I paid you long ago," the man replied.

Cleveland drew his gun and called Perkins a liar, and Plummer was quick to recognize his chance. He rushed over and faced Cleveland.

"Here now," he said, "behave yourself, Cleveland."

His old friend turned on him, smirking. "There isn't a man in this town can make me behave myself," he said.

In a flash Plummer pulled his gun and fired a shot into Cleveland's groin. From the floor Cleveland groaned in agony as Plummer pointed the gun once more.

"You won't shoot me when I'm down," he cried.

Plummer shook his head. "Get up!" he said.

Foolishly, Cleveland struggled to his feet. Plummer sent two bullets into his chest, just as Sheriff Hank Crawford ran into the place.

He ordered some of the by-standers to carry the dying man home, and Plummer didn't like the suspicion in the sheriff's eyes. But by this deed he grew in the minds of the townsfolk to the stature of a hero who had rid the town of a criminal.

Sheriff Crawford sat with Cleveland until he died, a short time later. This bothered Plummer, for he feared that Cleveland might talk before death sealed his lips forever.

Crawford tried in vain to have Plummer indicted for the killing, but one witness after another came to Plummer's defense. They said they'd heard the dead man say often that he would someday kill Plummer.

It was obvious to Plummer that the next thing he had to do was get rid of Sheriff Crawford. But, while awaiting an opportunity, he formed a gang of criminals and a period of violence and murder broke out. Miners were killed and robbed by this very secretive band, whose members displayed a great reluctance to talk when captured.

Actually they had vowed never to divulge the name of their leader, under penalty of death.

"I am innocent," was their password, and thus they became known to the terrified people as "The Innocents." In a few months they had robbed and killed more than one hundred times.

Plummer directed their activities safely from within the town, suspected only by the sheriff.

Finally, Sheriff Crawford made a public statement that Henry Plummer would have to leave town or die. This stirred up a great sympathy for Plummer, and that was all he needed.

One night he waited for Crawford in the darkness of the sheriff's doorway. At length Crawford came toward the house, carrying a rifle in the crook of his arm. Plummer waited until he was only ten paces away, then raised his own rifle and stepped from the shadows. Both men fired together, and Plummer dropped with a bullet through his arm.

Sheriff Crawford was no fool. Realizing that the town would be down on him for this, especially after the public statement he had made, he got out of town fast, never to return.

Henry Plummer was elected the new sheriff as soon as he recovered, the town playing right into his hands. Now it truly belonged to him.

And the band of murderers increased their activities.

In time Bannuck could no longer stand this wholesale robbery and murder and a band of vigilantes was formed, over Plummer's pleadings that taking the law into their own hands was not good.

One by one The Innocents were captured and strung up, until the plundering ceased altogether.

Plummer had met a severe defeat, but he was confident that he had never been suspected. However, some of the more suspicious had been watching him closely, and proof was finally obtained, unknown to Plummer.

When they came and dragged him screaming to his coward's death, Bannuck was once more a free town, a safe place in which to live.

It has been said of Henry Plummer that he could have been one of the great names in the winning of the West had he used his cunning and intelligence in the proper channels.

But instead he died a despised man. And he died ignorant of the fact that Jack Cleveland made only one reply to the questions of Sheriff Crawford when the lawman tried to get something on Plummer: "It makes no difference to you."

OUT OF THE CHUTES

IT LOOKS like a shoo-in for big Buck Rutherford to win the RCA All-Around Championship this year. He arrived at the Madison Square Garden Show with a 1,500 point edge over runner-up Casey Tibbs, and then won the bareback riding contest which was worth $2,370 to him. Casey's victory in saddle bronc paid him $1,860, so it seems that Buck now has a large margin.

At this writing there are only two more shows to be counted in—those at the Boston Garden and at the San Francisco Cow Palace. Casey would have to win just about everything at those rodeos to overtake Buck's lead.

We'd hoped to be able to give you the exact results of the big show in this issue, but the Madison Square Garden officials seem to guard the complete figures the way Uncle Sam guards his military secrets. But we did manage to find out the first, second and third place winners of the finals in each event.

Bareback Bronc-riding:
Buck Rutherford, Lenapah, Okla.
John Hawkins, Long Beach, Calif.
Jim Roeser, Caldwell, Ida.

Calf-Roping:
Buddy Groff, Bandera, Tex.
Junior Vaugh, Kenna, N. Mex.
Ray Wharton, Bandera, Tex.

Saddle Bronc-Riding:
Casey Tibbs, Ft. Pierre, S. Dak.
Guy Weeks, Abilene, Tex.
Tom Tescher, Sentinel Butte, N. Dak.

Steer Wrestling:
Gene Pruett, Ozark, Ark.
Buddy Groff, Bandera, Tex.
Jim Bynum, Waxahatchie, Tex.

Bull Riding:
Jim Shoulders, Henryetta, Okla.
Bub Cullison, Hyattville, Wyo.
Steve Johnstone, Long Beach, Calif.

Wild Horse Race:
Kent Fillingham, Ft. Worth, Tex.
Ellie Lewis, Penticton, B. C.
Buttons Yonnick, Clarksville, Tex.

For the real wrap-up on the championship races we'll have to wait for the official report from the RCA.

The few Easterners entered in the Garden Show this year, were, as usual, no real competition for the Westerners. But there is one Easterner who the Western cowboys always seek out when they get to town, a leather specialist who, some cowboys tell us, has no equal even in the West.

He's a young Negro named Johnny Jones, who has never been further west than Harrisburg, Pa. Yet in his nimble fingers there's plenty of know-how about saddles, reins and rigging. He runs a little leather shop not far from the Garden, and as soon as the cowboys arrive in New York he gets swamped.

Many of them bring along items of equipment which got damaged months before. And, of course, plenty of items get torn or broken during the show at the Garden. Every morning during the run, two or three top-hands arrive at the shop with some article of leather for Johnny to put back into top condition.

A cowboy's tack—almost all of it leather—is pretty nearly as important to him as his horse, so it's a high compliment to Johnny's skill for him to be entrusted with special saddles, straps and grips. And the trick riders, whose lives can even depend upon their equipment, also patronize Johnny heavily during the rodeo.

The remarkable thing is that Johnny doesn't ride a horse and doesn't want to, and yet he knows what part of a piece of rigging will have to take the greatest strain, or just how a special saddle must sit on a horse's back.

He's a shy young fellow, who can't explain where his talent came from. He just always liked leather, he says, and when he was growing up he used to hang around the local saddle shop in his home town, fascinated to watch while hide was cut, stitched or carved.

"I pestered the owner until finally in 1946 he took me on as an apprentice," said Johnny. "He couldn't pay me much, but I worked days and nights. It wasn't that he expected me to work that hard—I just wanted to learn fast."

He learned so fast that within a year he was ready to set up his own shop at home. He began to turn out belts, wallets and handbags, which were bought as fast as he made them. Encouraged by his local success, he moved into New York City in 1949.

"I had to branch out because there wasn't room at home for my workshop, my wife and our two children," he said.

By this time he had mastered his specialty, which is leather sculpture. He makes portraits of both horses and people in leather, and he has developed a secret method of painting in oil which makes the likeness strikingly good.

On order he has done portraits in leather of Adios, the fastest living stallion, and of Sun Strand, Arthur Godfrey's racer. And he's also done Godfrey himself, and even President Eisenhower.

This is the work he likes best, but it doesn't pay as well as designing holster sets for youngsters' cowboy outfits. The trickier the design, the better the customers like it, but Johnny isn't very proud of the ultimate results, because the manufacturers stamp them out by the thousands—not on leather, but on leatherette or plastic.

During the run of the rodeo, Johnny has to let his regular work go to keep up with the cowboys' demands. When Johnny set up shop in New York it never occurred to him that he'd end up as a specialist in Western tack. He doesn't even know how the cowboys found out about him.

Apparently they just beat a path to his door, the way the world is supposed to do to the door of the man who makes the better mousetrap.

Adios,

THE EDITORS

SHY SNAKE

THE WEST has its share of poisonous snakes, ranging from the giant Western Diamondback rattler to the beautifully colored coral snake. The West also has a boa, a distant relative of the dreaded boa family of the tropics.

This boa, however, found in several western states, is different for a number of reasons, mainly in size. Twenty inches is an unusually large specimen for this *boidae* species called the "rubber boa." "Two-Headed snake" is another common name for this reptile because it is difficult to tell the head from the tail. Silver snake, glass snake and rubber snake are other names foisted upon the shy, burrowing creature.

Despite the fact the rubber boa kills its prey by constriction as do the larger members of the family, it is a gentle, retiring creature which has the ability to sulk, or "play 'possum" when danger is near. It can also be rolled into knots and bounced —thus the name rubber boa.

It is said, too, that this miniature boa makes an excellent pet—if you're interested!

—Ferris Weddle

John stepped over the body and came out to where Mildred waited

Shannon's Revolt

By J. L. Bouma

AFTER the simple ceremony, John Shannon joined the line in the reception hall to offer his congratulations and well wishes to the bridal couple. He forced a smile to his long-jawed face. He was a tall man in his late twenties, who did not miss the pitiful attempts at gaiety in the room. It's wrong, Shannon thought bitterly, but there's nothing that can be done about it. Either Lew Reed makes his move, or he doesn't. Just stay out of it.

He shook hands with young Dan Foster, the groom, scarcely able to meet Dan's own fixed smile, and then leaned down to kiss the bride's cheek.

She murmured, "Thank you, John." For

SHANNON WANTED only peace, after long years of war . . . but sometimes a man can't live with himself if he stops fighting

a second her slender fingers clutched his wrist, and her eyes were alive with fear. Beverly Foster was a small, shapely girl, and Shannon knew this should be the happiest day in her life. It could be, he told himself, thinking it could also turn out to be the most tragic.

He moved on. Jeff Quinn, Beverly's seventeen-year-old brother, a slight boy with freckles and a thatch of reddish hair, gave him a grim nod.

"Did you hear the latest news?" he said, with youthful scorn. "Our man-killing marshal with his Buffalo Bill mustache took the day off to go fishing."

"Don't worry about it, Jeff," Shannon said. "It's probably nothing but talk."

"Talk!" the boy said angrily. "You know Lew Reed better than that. And Dan's never worn a gun in his life."

"He won't need to wear one today, either," Shannon said. He saw Mildred Mercay talking with George Oliver, the young minister. She was one of the bridesmaids, the daughter of a rancher at Pine, a tall, full-figured young woman with dark hair and steady gray eyes that now met his and made him feel uncomfortable. She said something, and Oliver glanced at Shannon and gave a nod.

Shannon joined them, and Oliver said, "We think it best to avoid any possible unpleasantness, John. So we decided—if you're willing, of course—that you should drive them to Ramsey's. They can catch the stage there instead of taking it here."

Shannon frowned. "What did Dan say about it?"

"That's what I'm worried about. He doesn't know yet, and he might not like the idea."

"And I wouldn't blame him," Mildred Mercay said flatly, looking at Shannon with her level gaze. "Would you run?"

Shannon gave her a quick, hard glance and said nothing.

"I must persuade him," Oliver said. He had a round, serious face, and he wore glasses. "Do you know where Lew Reed is this minute? At Schmitt's saloon. He and his men are there right next door to the depot. And you know as well as I do that the Ladder crew usually does its drinking at the Cattleman's Comfort. That means only one thing—Lew Reed means to start trouble." He clasped his hands at his back and shook his head. "The only solution is to get them out of town quietly before the stage leaves."

SHANNON looked around the crowded room. Most of these were townspeople, with a sprinkling of ranchers who wanted no trouble with Lew Reed and his Ladder crew. You can't blame them, Shannon thought. They've too much to lose, and so have you. Let it rest. You spent four years fighting a war, and for six years you worked like a dog to build up your ranch. Don't throw it all away over something that doesn't concern you.

He thought, too, of what had happened to Karl Kamden two years ago, when Karl had bucked Lew Reed; of the nesters and homesteaders that had been burned and driven out by Reed's crew. And a voice inside him added, He can do it to you if he makes up his mind.

Mildred Mercay and Oliver had moved to the long table, where the new Mrs. Foster was cutting the wedding cake. Shannon noticed that her hand trembled, and that behind her forced smile there was a desperate, unhappy expression. Dan Foster, a slender, bony young man, was pale, but his jaw was out. He had, Shannon remembered, come West a year ago for his health, and had gone to work as a clerk in the local bank, where he had met Beverly.

Now he was taking his bride back to Illinois to live. If he lives to get there, Shannon thought. But that was foolish; even Lew wouldn't shoot an unarmed man.

He remembered his own need to see Lew Reed, but then thought it unseemly to leave without first partaking of the wedding cake. As he turned, Mildred approached him with an extra plate. As he took it she said, "Let's sit with George."

But the minister was speaking to Beverly Foster, and Mildred led Shannon out on the small porch, where she lowered herself to the bench. Children played here beneath the live oaks, their voices ringing clear.

Below them, the town consisted of six blocks of business buildings, and they appeared almost deserted now in the hush of Sunday's sunshine.

Shannon took a bite of the cake, but it was tasteless. He felt Mildred looking at him and thought, here it comes.

"It's a terrible thing when one man can turn a wedding sour," she said, in that direct way of hers. "Who does he think he is, God?"

Shannon could not suppress a thin smile. "He's Lew Reed, and he owns the biggest ranch in the valley. He always had his way before his father died, and he hasn't changed since."

"Then it's time someone changed him."

Shannon said carefully, "A man can't take up another man's quarrel, Mildred."

Her answer was almost brutal. "Can he dodge one if it comes at him?"

His head came up, and his anger with it. "If you mean what I think you mean, then say it."

"I'm talking about the trouble you've been having with Lew Reed concerning that wild hay in Squaw Valley."

"Lew and I will settle that."

Her gaze hit him with sharp intensity. "Will you? How? And to whose satisfaction, Reed's or yours?"

Before he could answer, Oliver came outside, followed by Dan Foster. The minister made a hopeless gesture, his smile sick. "It's no use, he won't listen to me."

"I appreciate what you're trying to do," Dan Foster said, glancing at their faces in turn, "but it just isn't the kind of thing I would like to remember of this or any other day."

"But you mustn't feel that way about it," Oliver persisted in a low voice. "You know the talk that's been going around."

"I know," Dan Foster said quietly. "But Beverly and I are taking that three o'clock stage, and neither Lew Reed nor anyone else is going to stop us."

Mildred said softly, "Bless you, Dan," and glanced briefly at Shannon before joining the children playing in the yard.

"I'd better see how my bride is getting along without me," Dan Foster said, and smiled. "George, don't feel bad." He went inside.

GEORGE OLIVER sighed. "I suppose you know Moody left town for the day. I spoke to him last night and told him to watch Lew Reed in case of trouble, but it seems he went fishing."

Shannon said nothing. He looked down across the porch railing at Mildred leading the children in a game. She was laughing. She laughed often, he remembered, thinking of his weekly rides to her father's ranch, rides that had become not only a habit but a pleasure.

If only these things didn't have to happen, Shannon thought. If only a man could live at peace. The sunlight that shone through the live oaks lay broken upon the ground, and dust rose where the children played. A long way, a long time from the war, this place. Shannon sat on the bench feeling a heaviness within him that was harder to bear than the harshest moments of that war.

George Oliver had gone inside, and now Mildred returned unsmiling and said, "I'll tell you something. When I marry I would rather see my husband killed on our wedding day than to learn that he's a coward—" She broke off, and he knew she had been thinking of saying this, and now regretted having said it.

"That's foolish," Shannon said.

"Do you really think so?" she flashed. "Do you really believe I didn't mean it?"

"I believe you," Shannon said stiffly. "But you have no right to say it to me, nor to any man, for that matter."

She was silent a moment, then sighed and said, "I suppose not. It's just that there are times I wish I were a man." She paused. "You remember what Lew did to Karl Kamden? Oh, I know they called it self-defense, but Lew goaded Karl into that fight. He's fast with a gun and proud of it."

"Karl was armed," Shannon said. "But no man, not even Lew, is going to shoot a man down in cold blood unless he means to face a murder charge. And Lew is no fool."

"He'll try something. He'll be there out

in front of that saloon and he'll make an insulting remark. And Dan will call him, because he's not afraid. Anything might happen, and Dan would be helpless in a fight. You know that Lew is strong as a bull. Even just using his fists he might kill Dan or at least injure him seriously before anyone could stop him. If anyone tries, that is," she added bitterly. "And he'll likely have those men of his lined up to stop anyone from interfering." She paused, her gaze on him. When he said nothing, she spoke crisply. "If you get the chance, keep an eye on Jeff. I think he has something on his mind."

She left him. Furious with her, and with himself, he took the silver turnip from his vest pocket and saw that it was nearly one o'clock. His mouth grim, he rose and walked slowly down the hill, thinking, well, I promised myself yesterday that I would see him about that hay.

When he had filed and settled on Ladder's southern boundary, old Ben Reed had been more than fair in sharing the wild hay in Squaw Valley, a mile-long hollow that touched on both their domains. The hay was something they both needed to cut and store against the raw winters. Now Shannon remembered with thin anger how, after Ben's death, Lew had put his haying crew to work a week early, and had left Shannon scarcely enough of the natural feed to see his beef through the winter.

HE REMEMBERED the first time he'd talked to Lew about this. He'd sensed Lew's intentions then, but hadn't done anything about it because he had wanted no trouble.

"Yeah, I know about the agreement you had with the old man," Lew had said, "but you know how it is, Shannon. I run five steers to your one, so I need five times as much of that hay." He'd grinned. "You understand simple arithmetic, don't you?"

"And I have eyes, too," Shannon had said. "You took ten times the hay you left me. It's not right, Lew. That's public land, and we should share and share alike."

"We'll see about it next year," Lew had said.

The same thing had happened that next year, and John Shannon, still wanting to be reasonable, had talked again to Lew, but with no success. Lew was aware of his position and his strength, and it seemed he knew just how far he could push a man. Or a woman, for that matter, Shannon thought now. But Lew had pushed Beverly too far.

Lew had been seeing a lot of her for a long time. Everybody in town suspected that they would marry. But they had been wrong. One day, for reasons that men joked about in saloons, she had slapped Lew's face in public, and he'd never forgiven her. A week later he beat to a bloody pulp a young fellow who had taken her to a social.

He made his position clear, and after this the young bloods stayed away from her front porch, for none wanted to tangle with Lew Reed. Yet, surprisingly, he had made no move against Dan Foster. Not until the wedding was announced did Shannon hear the rumor that Lew had said something about a woman being married and becoming a widow on the same day.

Shannon had ignored the rumor. But now, as he approached Schmitt's Saloon, he remembered what Mildred had said, and he considered that Lew wouldn't be above giving Dan Foster a heartless beating. One of Lew's riders sat on the bench outside and gave Shannon a sullen nod as the latter entered. In the cool darkness he saw Lew Reed, whisky glass in hand, leaning on the bar, with two of his riders flanking him. Behind the bar hovered Schmitt, a concerned expression on his pudgy face. Shannon noted that there was no one else in the place.

"Well, look who's here," Lew Reed said in a taunting voice, and his gaze took a cut at Shannon's waist as though searching for signs of a gun. He was a big, tough-faced man with an arrogant mouth, and eyes like a stormy sky. "Where've you been, Shannon, to a wedding?" He guffawed across his shoulder at his men, and they shifted their feet and chuckled.

Shannon stepped forward reluctantly, feeling his nerves tighten.

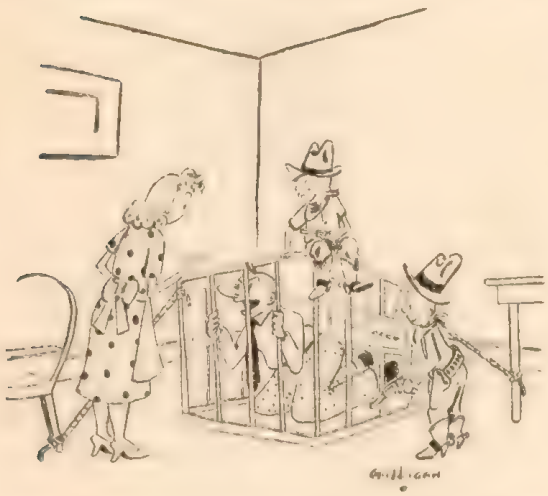
"Have a drink," Lew said, and Shannon could tell he'd had a few himself. "Tell us about the wedding. Tell us what the bride wore, and if the groom was nervous." He looked past Shannon's shoulder. "Hey, Doyle!" he bellowed. "Come in here!" He glanced again at the other two men. "What's the hell's wrong with that guy? Hey, Doyle!"

The man came in from outside. He moved reluctantly, his face sullen. "What do you want?"

"What're you doing out there?" Lew Reed demanded. "Getting some fresh air?"

"That's right."

"Well, dammit, stay in here and drink."



"Try to convince them I didn't rob the Red-Dog saloon."

He turned to the bar. "Get in the saddle, Schmitt. Open another bottle and don't be so slow about it."

SCHMITT did as he'd been told, a sickly grin on his face. He doesn't like it, Shannon thought.

"What are you shaking about?" Lew Reed demanded roughly. "Here, give me that bottle!" He took it wrenched the cork out with his teeth and spat it out on the floor. Then he poured drinks all around. "Well what about that wedding Shannon?" he asked.

"Lew," Shannon said, "I'll take a drink, but I didn't come here to talk about the wedding." He could feel Lew watching him as he picked up his glass. Lew had watched him in much that same way ever since they had first talked about the hay; it was as though Lew were watching to see how far he could push Shannon before he would meet resistance.

"Anything at all, Shannon," Lew said and grinned. "What's on your mind?"

"I guess you know that as well as I do," Shannon said, and forced his hand to remain steady as he raised the glass to his lips and drank. "We'll be haying next week, and I'm going to need all of it down to the South Fork—no more and no less than I used to cut when Ben was running Ladder."

Lew's grin creased broadly. "Why, now, that's quite a chunk of winter feed for a two-bit spread, isn't it? That doesn't leave me more than half—"

"It leaves you more than enough," Shannon said harshly. "Last winter you had hay to spare, while my steers ran to skin and bones. That's money lost. Now let's have no argument about it, Lew."

Lew Reed made a gesture. "Who's arguing? Am I giving you an argument?"

"I won't stand for one, so you'd better be sensible about this," Shannon said, and watched the stormy eyes widen, the color rise to Lew's face. He doesn't like being told, Shannon thought, remembering Lew's father telling him the same thing rather apologetically.

Lew guffawed suddenly and took a drink. "Hell, I'm the most sensible man alive. Isn't that right, boys?" One of them grunted. The man called Doyle glanced briefly at Shannon and looked away He doesn't like this either, Shannon thought.

Lew said, turning back to Shannon, "Haven't I always said we should share and share alike?"

Shannon clenched his fists, sickened by Lew's obvious mockery. Lew eyed him speculatively, then said in a surprisingly quiet voice, "I reckon we can come to an agreement, Shannon. But this is no day to talk business. Let's get together on it next week, okay?"

For a moment Shannon stared at him. He hadn't expected this. Then it struck him suddenly and without a doubt why Lew was being agreeable. Lew didn't want any trouble with him today, because he meant to settle first with Dan Foster. He had something in mind and didn't want anything to spoil it for him.

What are you going to do about it? Shannon thought. Do you think you can live the rest of your life without fighting, and turn into something like the nesters who let themselves get kicked around? Enraged with himself, he took a harsh breath and watched Lew ease away from the bar. Once again Lew's glance flicked to Shannon's waist.

"No, I'm not heeled," Shannon droned. Thinking, don't say it. Let it alone or you'll wake up some morning with your house burned down around your ears. But the thought of how long he had tried to be reasonable, and of Lew laughing behind his back, infuriated him, and he said, "I'm cutting what hay is coming to me next week, and you'd better believe that."

LEW'S eyes stormed with bright rage, but the grin still clung to his lips. "I told you," he began, tapping Shannon's chest with a blunt forefinger. But Shannon hacked down at the hand, caught the wrist, twisted Lew Reed around and dumped him on his back.

"Don't ever put your hands on me again," Shannon said, and wheeled out of the place, his rage burning bright. It was only when he found himself once again striding toward the church that a dull sense of despair overcame him. He understood now how far he had bucked water, and that this was the reason Mildred had spoken to him the way she had. She'd never been sure of him as a man because he hadn't stood up to Lew in the first place.

Nearing the corner, he was at first scarcely aware of a figure dodging in a doorway. Then he recognized Jeff Guinn. The boy stood crouched over a little, the front of his tight suit coat bulging. He gazed at Shannon with sullen eyes and said nothing.

"Reception over?" Shannon asked.

"They're all at the house getting ready to leave," the boy said sullenly, and started to edge past past Shannon, who caught his arm.

"What's the matter, Jeff?"

"Let go of me." The boy tried to wrench his arm loose, his head lowered. Shannon put a big hand against the front of Jeff's coat, then ripped the buttons open and lifted the big sixgun from under the boy's belt.

"So that's it," Shannon said softly.

"Somebody's got to do it!" the boy cried. "He'll kill Dan, I know he will. Just like he killed Karl." The boy started to cry, then stopped himself, and his shoulders slumped. Shannon pushed the gun under his own belt and put an arm around Jeff's shoulder.

"Lots of time for that," he said. "But don't say anything about this, you hear? Now run along to the house."

After the boy had gone, Shannon crossed the street to the Cattlemen's Comfort and stood at the bar by the window, from where he could just see Schmitt's place. He leaned an elbow on the bar, an untouched drink before him, and nerves twanged his flesh. Is there no other way out of this? he thought, and wondered about men like Lew Reed. Lew, who had buffaloed his milder father since he was fifteen, who'd always had his own way, and meant to have it today.

He's got it all planned, Shannon thought, the way he planned it about the hay. A little less for me each year, until one year he takes it all. Maybe he meant to take it all this year.

That was the thing that got a man. Lew would not only take what he needed, but more than he needed, because something in him demanded it. Lew was no kind of neighbor to get along with peacefully.

Shannon saw a man step outside of Schmitt's saloon and glance up and down the street, then turn back inside. He looked again at his watch; it was half past two. Ten minutes later, Schmitt himself came outside and strode in the direction of his house. Shannon frowned. With abrupt decision he went out and crossed the street to the alley, and so came up behind Schmitt's

saloon. He took hold of the door knob and turned it, but the door had been locked. He took a long breath, turned to the window near the door, and forced it open.

THIS was Schmitt's office, a barren little room containing a rolltop desk on which a number of ledgers were piled. Shannon crawled inside and crossed to the door. He opened it quietly and stepped into the narrow hallway that led to the saloon proper. He eased the gun from his coat.

At the front, Lew Reed stood in the open doorway, while his three men were lined up at the window, their backs toward Shannon.

As Shannon moved quietly forward, someone came up from outside. Lew Reed didn't move, and Shannon heard him say, "Do your drinking somewhere else, buster." The man moved on along the street.

A second later Lew said, "Here comes the procession," and then, "and the stage."

It was then Shannon got an inkling of what Lew Reed had in mind. He came forward along the bar, and was halfway along it when he said, "You boys just stand right where you are."

They all turned their heads.

Shannon said, "The first man that so much as makes a move, gets it."

"You know what you're doing?" Lew Reed said wickedly.

"Shut up, Lew," Shannon shouted. "You've spoken your last piece. You'll stand there and keep your mouth shut until that stage is rolling." Lew said nothing. He looked out on the street.

There was a buckboard loaded with luggage, followed by two buggies. They rolled past slowly, George Oliver driving the first buggy, the newly-married couple beside him. Then came Jeff and Mildred, and a moment later a dozen and more friends that had walked to the depot. Lew Reed stood there and said nothing, and those that passed by did not once glance in his direction. Shannon waited, his nerves steady, his gun trained on Lew's back.

Then, from outside, came happy cries of farewell, and answering shouts, and it was as though a cloud of fear and apprehension had been lifted from all these people and once again they could breathe with ease.

Then there came a clatter of hoofs and a creaking of harness, as the stage rolled past and picked up speed on its way out of town. It left behind a long dust roll that settled slowly as the crowd strolled once again past the saloon.

"Had your fun, Shannon?" Lew Reed asked softly. "Ready to call it a day?"

"Not yet," Shannon said. "You had it planned, didn't you, Lew? Goad Dan into coming inside, and then what? Shoot him and then swear he took a gun away from one of your men?"

"Nobody does anything to me and gets away with it," Lew said. "A horse can outrun a stage, Shannon, and you can't hold us here forever."

"All day and all night, if necessary. Or, if you want it that way, till they get to Illinois. Would you follow 'em that far, Lew?"

"I'll be damned if I wouldn't," Lew said. And then his body rippled in turning, and his arm streaked down and came up with his gun. Shannon fired. The roar of that shot still hung in the room as Lew Reed shot wild, then slumped to the floor.

Shannon turned his gun at once, but none of the other three had attempted to draw their weapons.

Shannon said, "Unless you boys mean to face a lot of angry people, I suggest you ride out of town and out of the country."

They glanced at each other, and Doyle was the first to move. "I didn't like the idea to begin with, Shannon," he said. "I'm glad it turned out this way." He hesitated before stepping across Lew's body. The other two shrugged and followed.

Shannon went over to Lew and saw that he was dead. Slowly, people came forward from all along the street, and then he saw Mildred standing there and looking at him.

He put his arm around her waist and they walked through the crowd up the street, both smiling as though they were only aware of each other.

Decision at Sundown

By Michael Carder

The bullet caught him squarely in the back and the horse leaped

CONCLUSION

WHEN Doc Storrow returned to his office from the Summerton house, the Texan had gone—probably back to the stable. Doc paused in the center of the room, staring at the floor, before he put his bag on the desk and sat down.

Just now all that he had wanted so much had been his for the taking, and he had pushed it from him with a melodramatic gesture. The three of them could have

started life again somewhere else, and Lucy—well, she would have loved him. All these years she had come to him, knowing that he was a drinking, no-good medico. And Helen had wanted him.

Thoroughly miserable, he lifted the bottle from his desk and took a drink. But, as he lowered it, a terrific wave of revulsion hit him. The stuff tasted foul and seemed to sour his soul.

With a curse he flung the bottle across the room. It broke with a crash, and whisky ran down the discolored wallpaper and spread its reek through the room.

That was the way a life broke, he thought.

THE STORY SO FAR: BART ALLISON finds TATE KIMBROUGH, the man responsible for the death of Allison's wife, and breaks up Tate's wedding to LUCY SUMMERTON by announcing his intention of killing Tate.

Bart's friend SAM is killed by Tate's men, and Bart in turn shoots the killers and frightens Tate's other men away. In desperation Tate bribes MEALY and PEGLEG SHANNON to help him ambush Allison in HOLY JOE MILL'S church.

Meanwhile Lucy's foster-father CHARLES SUMMERTON, who is being blackmailed by Kimbrough, tries to get Lucy to elope with Kimbrough, and when she refuses he kills himself rather than risk exposure. Lucy learns that her real father is DOC STORROW, who gave up his wife and infant daughter when he became an alcoholic.

As this concluding installment opens, Lucy has confided to Doc, who has always been her friend, that she loves Bart Allison. . . .

Nothing left, the vessel shattered, the vile odor of decay— Abruptly he sank forward on his desk, his head pillowed in his arms.

He did not hear the soft steps on the stairs, after a long time, but as the door opened he heard its soft creak and jerked his head up, startled.

Lucy stood there, her eyes shining oddly. For a breathless moment she stood poised, then her hands went out toward him, and with a cry she ran to him. "Dad!"

Then her arms were around him, and Doc's throat was so full he could hardly swallow. He held her a long time, patting her sleek dark hair, saying nothing.

AND then she raised her head to smile at him. "I always loved you, I guess," she said, "right from the first peppermint stick you gave me when I cut my toe and Mother brought me here to have it dressed. Did I know—did I guess, Dad?"

Doc smiled and shook his head. "No, Lucy. People know their own blood by the way they are treated. And I—well, I treated you as badly as any father could."

But she denied that with her eyes, her happy face. "You were always here, ready to listen, to talk, and to let me talk. Mother knows that—and where she made her mistake."

"She told you, then?"

"Including what you said today."

Doc blinked fast. He said, "Why, I guess that settles it," and turned to the window to hide his emotion.

He spied Holy Joe striding down the street, and watched idly. His interest lifted when he saw the Texan move out of the stable and halt as Holy Joe called to him.

Doc said, "And now the rest of it's going to be settled, Lucy—it's sundown."

That brought her quickly to his side. He felt her hand on his arm, tight. She said, "Dad, raise the window. Let's hear what they are saying."

Allison was glowering at Holy Joe, who had delivered the message from Tate Kimbrough. Hate flamed in Bart's gray eyes as Joe finished. "That's the whole story. I reckon he was leveling."

"You pious fool," Allison said scornfully. "The only thing he did was chase you out of your own church so he could hole up there. Well, it won't work! I'm going after him just the same." He started away.

Holy Joe let out an exclamation.

People who had been drawn by the loud voices were halting along the street now, some following at a distance. Near the saloon, Ruby James watched, her eyes bitter and frightened.

Holy Joe, loping along beside Allison, was shouting in shocked outrage: "You can't kill a man in my church! That's the House of God!"

"We'll see," Allison said grimly.

When they reached the churchyard, they stopped some thirty yards away. Allison was oblivious to the crowd in his wake, tensely watching this scene being played out. Holy Joe was still pleading but Allison was not listening. For him life had tapered down to this moment. There was no turning back, nothing could change it—not the memory of Sam's attempt to get him to give up, nor even the identical lie Kimbrough had told Holy Joe.

Holy Joe was tugging at his sleeve. He turned, scowling.

Out of the corner of his vision Allison caught a quick movement at the window of the old stable. His hunted-animal senses shot him a warning, and he whirled just as the blast of a shotgun ripped the air. He threw himself to the ground, heard the slug sing past him, and fired. He heard a cry, full of fear and pain. He scrambled to his feet and the door of the old stable burst open.

Mealy, the swamper, fell out, his hand clapped over a shoulder wound, and whimpered, "Don't kill me! Please don't shoot me!" His face was twitching with fear. "Look—I'm shot up now. For God's sake, don't kill me!"

Allison said with contempt, "How much did he pay you to try that?"

"A thousand dollars. More'n I've had in my whole life!"

Allison shoved the man. "Get out of here!"

Mealy let out a frightened bleat and ran.

Allison took five quick steps toward the church, not knowing that he was saving his life by keeping out of Pegleg Shannon's line of fire, so far. "Tate," he called, "it didn't work. Come on out of there. "It's you and me, now."

EVEN as Allison started forward, he heard Holy Joe's outraged cry. "Tate, you gave me your word you wouldn't fight in there." Suddenly he gave a sick groan. "So that's why you were so anxious to help the church! Thought you could buy me, eh?"

Holy Joe took Kimbrough's wallet from his pocket, hurled it to the ground, and started walking toward the church where he thought Kimbrough was hidden, his face rigid.

"Come back here, you fool!" Allison called sharply. "It may be a trap."

Joe mumbled, "The hand of Mammon touched me, but Tate Kimbrough can't cross up the Lord." He broke into a lurching run toward the church.

Again Allison shouted a warning, but just before Holy Joe reached the door a carbine blast from somewhere off to one side sounded loud. Joe clutched at his chest, tottered.

Then Allison was running.

He came on at a crouch, eyes darting in the direction from which the blast had come. He had a quick glimpse of Pegleg Shannon behind the church sign board, the smoking carbine still in his hands, staring at the staggering Holy Joe. At that instant Pegleg saw Allison, and his gun boomed. The glass shattered in a window above Allison's head. He fired straight at Pegleg, heard him grunt with the impact and saw him start to topple.

Then another gun crashed from the trees in back of the church, and splinters snapped from the wooden wall near Allison's face. but he had seen the direction from which the flash had come and he drove a shot at it. He heard Kimbrough's yelp of fear.

"All even now, Tate," he called. "Your number's up."

He heard the crashing of brushy undergrowth as Kimbrough fought a way through it in a desperate effort to escape. Allison wheeled and ran for the trees.

Before he could reach them, the smashing report of a gun stopped him. He saw Kimbrough run on—the brush was too thick for him to make his way through it—plunge into the door of the old stable, and swing the door shut behind him. Allison waited, for when he opened that door he would be framed in the light for Kimbrough.

But it wasn't in him to wait. He had traveled too far, too long, he had hunted too unsuccessfully until now. He ran across the open space, hit the side of the stable, and pushed easily along its side to a corner. Turning it, he saw a rotting pile of manure and litter, and the small aperture through which it had once been thrown out. He was at Tate Kimbrough's back now, facing the door which Kimbrough would be watching.

He trod softly crossing the litter heap, which had almost been transformed into humus by years of rain and snow. Crouching, he eased quickly through the low opening and stood up in the deep shadows.

The smell of an abandoned place was all about him—lingering smells of horse nitrogen, and hay and rotting straw, and the faint, salty odor that had once come from sweaty harness. He eased over behind a crumbling stall, peering toward the front where Kimbrough would be.

He breathed through his mouth, in order to hear every slight sound. A rat scurried across straw with a rustling sound. That was all. No sound from the outside, none in this dark hole of a building where Tate Kimbrough was crouching in the darkness.

Allison set one foot on the ground, testing the footing. It was soft and spongy, but the other foot found the hard-packed earth of the runway. He was moving forward again when his boot struck something which raised a faint echo which seemed to swell and fill his ears. He stopped dead, eyes prying into the darkness.

AFTER a while he moved forward once more. It was as black as the ace of spades in here. He bumped into something, and his probing hand told him that it was a stairway leading to a loft. Then his boot snapped something underfoot, making a sharp noise. The voice of Kimbrough came down the stairs at him.

"That you, Allison?"

He drew in a long breath, then let it out slowly, standing rigid.

"Kimbrough," he said, "come down like a man. I don't want to come up after you—" And he drew his gun and fired straight up the stairs.

He heard the man's frightened cry and heard a creaking overhead, as Kimbrough hastily changed his position. But by the time the slight sound had stilled, Allison was at the top of the stairs, lying flat. He waited for Kimbrough to make the next move.

Kimbrough's voice said hopelessly from one corner, "It's not right, Allison. I swear to you that she told me you had died in a prison camp."

Alison fired at the sound of the voice. He heard the bullet tear through wood, and heard Kimbrough shift his position again.

"Listen," said Kimbrough, "before God, I wasn't the first one to move in on you. There had been others. I didn't intend to break up a home. She begged me to take her with me."

Allison fired again. The powder bloomed orange-yellow and blue in the darkness. He heard the bullet smack into Kimbrough and he fired three more shots. Muzzle blasts were leaping back at him and the loft was alive with quick, roaring explosions. Out of the racket he heard Kimbrough scream wild and high, and then the sound faded and the salty aroma of gunpowder was all around him and he fired no more. From yonder in the darkness came the ragged breathing of Kimbrough.

He heard the man groan and twist his body, and he heard boards creak.

Words almost like a sigh came from Kimbrough. "You remember this. She had men before me, and she left me for another. God knows that, but maybe you don't."

"You're a liar, Kimbrough."

"No—no!" The protest came feebly. He ceased to move, and Allison thought he was dead. Then, as though from far away, Kimbrough panted, "It helps—knowing you did this—for nothing. A damned—cheap—revenge—to remember." And the words died as softly as the breath of a departing breeze.

Allison listened a long while and heard no more. Cautiously he got up and went forward. He touched Kimbrough with his boot, then bent and touched him and lifted an arm and felt it fall back loose. He went back down the stairs.

Outside the door he just stood there while people, running past him, were beating their way into the stable and up the stairs. He could hear their excited comments.

And then he became aware that a woman was screaming in there, the muffled sound coming to his ears horrible and closed in, like the wail of a soul sinking into perdition.

"That's Ruby James," he heard someone say. "She loved Kimbrough, all right."

He walked away from it, away from people, crossing the churchyard and heading down into the town. For the first time he realized that darkness was coming down through the dusk.

He met Doc striding along grimly with his bag. Doc stopped and asked, "Where you going?"

"Down to get a bottle of whisky."

"You'll need it, but it won't help."

"I'll find out."

"So you will." Doc looked at him closely. "Feel happy now?"

Allison turned away. He couldn't answer that; he didn't want to. "Go to hell," he said, plodding on.

WALKING without aim, Bart Allison came into the heart of the town. He stopped before the livery stable and looked around as at a place strange and alien. He couldn't get his thoughts in order; everything was confused, mixed-up.

He walked over to the trough, bent, and let the water run over his face and neck. For a moment it freshened him. He tried to think of nothing but the coolness, with no thoughts, no people, no feelings to bother him.

Some people were coming back from the churchyard, but they kept on the other side of the street, silent as they saw him. He felt a sudden revulsion. He stalked into the stable and saddled his horse, to leave.

As suddenly, he hesitated. Sam's horse whinnied and threw up its head, and abruptly it hit him with a thousand-ton jolt —Sam had told the truth, just before they'd fought!

Another thought seared into his brain. Kimbrough wouldn't have lied when he was dying. He told the truth—like Sam did.

He stumbled out into the driveway and sank down on one of the bales that had been their breastwork. He sat with his head in his hands, misery, night-deep, like a sickness in him.

Belle had never been real! The twisting force of that knowledge came to him now. He had lived with, had loved, a ghost—a beautiful, false, treacherous ghost, who had tricked him in the end. He had sought peace that would let her spirit and his rest, and now—he raised his head, staring at the darkness—now he would never know peace again.

"A damned cheap revenge to remember." He could hear Kimbrough saying that, with his last dying gasps for breath. The words were a curse, his perpetual damning

Some people were coming down the way, following a buckboard and, as it came abreast, he saw three bodies in the back. It stopped down the street and the bodies were carried into the furniture store that was also the undertaking establishment.

Allison's breath was coming short and pinched when, turning, he found Doc by his side.

Allison said, "That where they have my partner?"

Doc nodded. "And Swede Hobson, Charles Summerton, and poor old Pegleg Shannon. And of course your big job—Tate Kimbrough." He paused, then said, "I don't care so much about them, but Holy Joe had integrity. He clung to what he believed, gave his life for it."

"I didn't kill him," Allison said angrily. "That cripple shot him."

"Hmmm."

Allison whirled, savage, defiant. "So you're going to blame it all on me! But you were sure hell-bent on having Kimbrough out of the way."

Doc said ironically, "I wish you'd get out of town, Allison. You've been the cause of enough trouble. I'm afraid they'd want you to stay, and I can't think of anything much worse."

[*Turn to page 118*]

MAN FROM MARS?

This is an actual photo of a SEE Magazine photographer taking underwater pictures of shark-hunting off the coast of Mexico.

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"Doc," said Allison thinly, "I didn't ask you to come here, and I don't want your advice. You're a cracker-barrel philosopher like I've seen a hundred times, and you think you've got a better view of life than anybody else. You're a washed-up medico, and I wish you'd quit snapping at my heels."

Doc noted Allison's agitation, his anger, before he said shortly, "Maybe you have possibilities after all." Then he turned and tramped across the street.

Allison stood glowering after Doc. The old man had an unsettling way about him. He—and the girl, Lucy. The thought of her flooded back into his mind unexpectedly, unwanted, seeming to tear him between the past, which had suddenly gone to pieces, and the present, in which there was nothing.

HE STARTED down the street toward the undertaker's.

Only one or two people were there, and when Allison came in they left. The undertaker, a bald, long-faced man, nodded. "Your friend?" he inquired, and motioned Allison into a room in back.

Sam was laid out on a table, with his hat over his face and his hands folded over his chest. He looked long and lean as always, only there were brownish stains all over his poor, threadbare shirt.

Allison waved the undertaker out and walked closer to the table, looking down at Sam. He felt his throat choke, and now all the little things and the big ones, the hard times and the good, the long months and the years they had been together, came back to him with a powerful jolt.

He began to understand a little why Sam had stuck with him. Sam had told him he had never thought they would catch up with Kimbrough, and that was why he'd stayed on the hunt for the man. It had been something to do. Sam hadn't wanted anything else—just the riding, the playing at a game, the different faces they saw all the time, the different towns, the holding ahead a goal to lend a little excitement to it all. That, and being with him, Bart Allison.

Sam had had nobody else. Bart had been his whole life, and all life had meant to Sam was staying with him and playing this game through. And all the while he'd had to let the lie of Belle exist or their search would have been ended.

Bart thought of that now. How did a man find an end in life anyhow—some substantial thing to hold to? Sam had found it in the darnedest way. Bart himself had made his whole existence the tracking to earth of a man whom he had believed to be the cause of all his troubles. And now, when he knew he had been wrong, he saw the waste, the vast desolation and the utter uselessness of it all.

It had brought him and Sam right here to this dingy room in this strange town of Sundown, with Sam dead and his loneliness forgotten, and himself with nothing inside him, nothing ahead, and a lot of bad thoughts as his reward.

He thought, you killed a man who didn't deserve it. You made your best—and only—friend run into a bullet because you wouldn't listen to reason.

It was too much, all of it, and when he reached out and touched Sam's cold hands, mutely asking forgiveness, something happened that he'd forgotten was possible for him. Tears, man's tears, bitter and blinding, burned in his eyes.

He was trying then to tell himself that Sam was better off than he was. It was no good, because Sam was dead and he was alive, and that seemed to be what counted most.

He swiped at his eyes with the back of his dirty paw and went out the door. The bald-headed undertaker cleared his throat.

"Now, about the funeral—"

Allison had about ten dollars in his pocket. He said, "How much does a decent box cost?"

"Why, that depends on just what you want to pay."

"I'm not proud, and Sam wasn't. I've got a horse, worth seventy-five, with a saddle worth that much on him, down at the livery. Will that cover it?"

"I can give him a good burial for that," said the man.

Allison went toward the door. "The horse'll be there. It was his."

"You don't mind if I send a boy down there for it?"

Allison shook his head and went out.

IT WAS full dark now, but people were still hanging around the streets, talking over the big events that had struck Sundown with such violent unexpectedness on this Sunday. Allison saw them, heard their murmurs and heard the clink of glasses inside Kimbrough's Idle Hour Saloon, but walked on, straight back to the livery stable.

He sat down on a bale of straw. He didn't know what to do—whether to stay over, or let them bury Sam without his being there. It didn't matter whether he was there or not. He'd failed Sam when he was alive, and nothing he could do, now that Sam was dead, could change that.

Hearing steps approaching, he raised his head, listening dully. In the group of men who came into the dim light beyond the archway and stopped, he recognized Morley Chase of the Cross C, some other ranch folks, and a few townsmen.

"Allison?" Chase called. "You in there, Allison?"

Allison got up. He said thickly, "What do you want?"

Chase moved forward a little. "Come on out here. We want to talk to you."

"You can say your say from there."

"Now, wait. There's no use being uppity. How'd you like to stay here and be marshal, Allison? We need one, and you would just about fill the bill. Just say the word and you've got a job."

After a long pause Allison said, "Real happy, aren't you?"

"How's that?"

"You'll get everything back that Kimbrough took away from you, won't you? So you figure you'll toss something the way of the fellow that killed him—him and that dumb Swede. Mighty white of you."

"That's a hell of an attitude to take," Chase said resentfully.

"Is it?" A wild, unreasoning rage was rising, knife-edged, in Allison. He didn't understand why himself, except that he hated these people now, as much as he'd thought he hated Kimbrough. "You want to buy a little more of the same from me, I reckon, but it's not for sale. I'm damned sorry I did your dirty work at all. My partner's dead. You think I could walk this town and not lay a gun on every man in the place who either helped Tate Kimbrough or stood for what he did?"

"Why, now—"

"Why now, nothing!" Bart took a quick step or two forward. Seeing something wild and menacing in his dark figure, in his voice, the men edged back.

"Not one of you is worth half as much as Kimbrough was!" he blazed. "He at least had the guts to be downright bad. He robbed you and made you like it. Which one of you ever tossed any lead at him? Whoever really tried to stop him? Didn't you have a gun? Do you want one now?" He jerked his own from the holster, his voice rising. "Then take mine! And damn you all to hell!"

He threw his sixgun straight at the group, and it hit a man. He howled, and the others scattered and fell back. Allison made a dash and picked up his carbine. He swung it by the barrel against a post until it shattered and the barrel was twisted. He pivoted and swung it and let it go at them, too, but it sailed out into the street and landed in the dust.

He howled, "Take 'em both! Use 'em, damn you! And don't come back to offer me your damned blood money."

The men were standing off into the street, silent, awed by this sudden, incomprehensible savagery. It didn't sound like the man who had cleaned out the town. After awhile they went back to the saloon, muttering among themselves.

ALLISON didn't understand it either. He had heard the words he shouted, but they hadn't meant anything to him, either. He didn't know why he'd gone berserk like that. Then he was sitting on the bale of straw again, and he was alone. He was lost, sinking in a swamp of nothingness, with nothing below him or above him or around him. He was simply going

down, and it didn't matter because he also was nothing, was hollow inside, drained out, empty.

He was aware of a soft movement on the litter beside him, and jerked up his head. He made a quick defensive movement, and someone came near him.

Lucy Summerton's voice said, "Don't—please don't. It's only me."

She sat down beside him, on the other end of the bale of straw.

He glowered at her through the darkness. Yet he felt a warmth that came from her presence, was conscious of some slight perfume from her hair, her body, coming to his nostrils.

"What do *you* want?" he demanded, half angrily.

She seemed to shrink away from him a little, there in the darkness. "I—I thought maybe I could help somehow," she said meekly.

"Well, you were wrong. You can't."

She said nothing in reply to that. She sat there quiet and small, but he was conscious of her. He remembered how she had kissed him this afternoon, and all that she had showed him in that kiss now clashed with the other things in him, and the conflict angered him, for it deepened a dilemma out of which he saw no way.

"I saw you throw your guns away," she said. "I heard what they wanted you to do, and what you told them. I'm glad."

"Are you?" he asked sarcastically. "Did you bring a medal to pin on me?"

"Are you trying to hurt me or yourself?" she asked softly.

Allison groaned. "Can't a man have one traight-line feeling?"

"I heard you refuse the job. What will you do now? Ride on?"

"I'm used to riding," he said drily. "And the town is a mighty long walk from any place."

She was silent for moments, then suddenly, impulsively, she moved so close to him that he could feel the outline of her warm, soft thigh against his. It sent a thrill through him, but then came resentment that anyone should have an idea that he would ever be trapped again.

Her hand was on his arm, gripping it. In a low, throbbing voice she begged, "Don't go! Please don't go away from here."

"Why?"

"Because I don't want you to." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "What do I have to do to make you see why?"

"You think I'd fall for that stuff?" he demanded. Then, almost brutally, "All right—suppose I say I might. Suppose I say you have to tell me what there is in it for me if I stay."

She said, "You can be cruel, can't you?"

He shrugged. "It wasn't my idea."

He saw her bow her head, saw her hesitate. He was on fire with anger, with a sadistic happiness that made him want to laugh sardonically, at her abasement.

He said, "I see—you just up and say things that come into your head. Now that I call your bluff, you see what a damn fool thing you've said. Go on home and wait for some of the local boys to make a play. You've got no business fooling around with men. The first thing you know, one of them will make a woman of you."

LUCY SUMMERTON drew up a little and looked at Allison in surprise. The harsh disgust in his tone, brutally unmasked, hit her hard.

"That's what I want—to be a woman," she said unsteadily, her voice proud and apologetic and at the same time uncertain. "I want someone to understand that I *am* a woman. But it can't be just *anyone*. That's why I want *you* to stay."

He heard his heart beating loudly in his ears. His throat, his chest were filling. But he drew away and said thickly, "You'd get out of here right now, if you knew what's good for you. Let me alone! A man can be pushed only so far."

"You don't understand," she said softly. "I am not throwing myself at you. I know you are going to leave, and I don't want you to, because I'd never feel as if all had been finished between us. It doesn't take a hundred years for people to feel like that about others, does it?"

Allison got to his feet. "Then *I'll* go," he said shortly.

"Wait! Please!"

His agitation burst its bounds.

"What kind of a girl are you?" he flung out. "A honkytonk floozy, or a plain fool with too much curiosity?"

"That's what I want you to find out," she said simply. "Only you. And when you do, you will never leave me. I promise you that." Slowly she got to her feet, looking at him through the shadows. She murmured, "I could be everything to you that *she* was, and more."

"Go home and grow up," he snarled. "And don't talk about things you know nothing about."

As he went up the street Lucy Summerton watched him, shamed yet proud. But more than all else, she was determined. Her woman's intuition told her some of what he was going through. She had been utterly frank, perhaps saying what she would not have had the courage to voice in the light of day.

He needs me, she thought, and I need him. He tried to hurt me purposely. That shows he thinks something of me. He's the worst man who ever came to this town, but there's wonderful good in him, too. That's the part I want.

Her determination made up her mind for her. She would wait. He had to come back here. When he did, she'd be here.

As Allison went up the street and entered the saloon, he saw that a lot of the townsmen were there. A poker game was in progress at one of the tables. Morley Chase and his men were at the bar, lifting drinks. There seemed to be a festive air in the place, except for Gus, the bartender, who mechanically attended the customers, but whose face was glum and sour.

Seeing Allison, everyone paused to look, and he returned the looks as he went to a vacant space along the bar, dismissing them. In a moment talk began buzzing again, but he paid no attention whatever. Yet he knew they were all watching him, discussing him, talking about what had happened that day, and how much better the town would be now that it had had a purging. Both ranch-

[*Turn page*]

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ers and townsmen were pleased, for the most part, with the prospect of a new order of things. Most of them would find some gain in Tate Kimbrough's death or freedom, or relief from a restriction that had cost them money or pride, or both.

THE bartender's thick brows knit in a frown as he studied Allison. Gus would have liked to order him out of the place, but didn't dare. Allison gave him a hard look that moved him to action. He reached for a bottle and a glass, brought them to Allison, and set them down on the wood with a harder bang than usual. Allison raised his eyes, held Gus's glance for a moment, then leaned over the bar and said in a slow, thin voice, "Now, pick 'em up and put 'em down again."

The barkeep reddened, angry and embarrassed at having been caught in this small act of defiance. He was a seasoned barman, a fighter who considered himself as tough as they came, and his pride was challenged. But he didn't know what he ought to do now. He didn't understand this gray-eyed, soft-spoken man who had a wild look in his eye but carried no gun. He had his memories of brawls and victories, but somehow the heart for it just wasn't in him any more.

Allison read the man's pride, but saw his determination fail him in this moment. It was a small thing, but a lucky one for Allison right now. He realized he might give way to blind violence if the man did not bow. It was senseless, but it grew out of proportion as Gus hesitated.

He salted the wound. "Hear me? Set it down again."

The barkeep felt his legs grow watery, his belly cold. Then he picked up the bottle, set it down softly before Allison and muttered, "You make a lot out of nothing."

But as he stepped away his face showed that he had lost something without which he would never again feel equal to what might come. Had he realized it, he might have marked that moment as the one when he ceased to be his own man.

Allison poured a drink and downed it, feeling not a bit better for having had his unreasonable way, nor because of the whisky, either. He had a second drink, but after that didn't bother to count them. His mind was pulling away from things around him, and he was looking at his own feeling with a kind of alcoholic objectivity.

It was an unreal feeling, like the time the fever had ridden him for weeks in the Yankee prison camp, and nothing about him had full meaning, but came to him in cottony waves of half-sensation which always stopped short of clear comprehension, even while a part of his mind told him that he ought to grasp them or go mad.

He saw now that this vague discomfort had come upon him at the moment Tate Kimbrough had died. It was a vast unease, as though he had been cut loose from everything that had meaning, motivation, even causal relationship in his whole past. Somewhere in the swirling medley Belle was growing hazier, more distant.

But as she became more nebulous he knew that she was mocking him, laughing at him with siren eyes and red lips and a strident voice, and she was saying what Kimbrough had said, "Not the first one—not the only one."

And Sam seemed to be there too. Sam, dead and long and loose and cold, was saying in his still voice, "Something you ought to know—ought to know."

Bart Allison shook his head stupidly. He poured his glass half full of whisky, gulped it down, and hung on the wood with both hands, feeling the fire run outward from his belly along his veins, gagging him a little.

In a moment his mind lightened. He took another drink and moved up with his belly against the wood to hang there with his elbows on the bar, loose in all his joints. Maybe this was the way to lay all the ghosts that were tormenting him in their witches' holiday—Belle's, Kimbrough's, Sam's, poor Holy Joe's, all the rest. Maybe drinking would do it.

HE RAN his hand over the wood's coolness. The solidness, the realness of that man-made object somehow helped him. That was what he needed—

solid things. Back before the War, he'd known little of the solidity or reality of much of anything in the world—back before he met Belle and married her. Things were fun then, there had been no tension, nothing to get stirred up about.

The even run of time had been good—the fun, the laughter, the hot and cold, the small sadnesses, quickly past, the joys that had been sharp and strong to every one of his senses. There had been no past then, but a future which had seemed always bright, and he had had no other idea than that he himself would live forever. Life had been something that simply ran on and on, waiting for his coming to meet whatever it offered, and it was all good.

And then, the War with its terror, its misery, but always through the agony had been sweet longings, and at last the final reward of going back.

Here Bart's mind stopped for a moment, and he had to have another drink before he looked at the next memory picture.

The carefree times had ended then and there. It had been impossible to find them again. And in their place had been only Belle's tragedy and his own, and the daily chore of remembering Tate Kimbrough's name as he fell asleep, and the first waking sensation of recalling it, a goad to his impatience to be on the trail again.

He had been hurried, pushed, crowded by that terrible urgency for three years. And now, at this moment, he realized that it had had no more substance than breath of air, this enormous compulsion. He had been traveling an imaginary road that had developed into a treadmill, and the end had been unreal.

If there were some way, he thought, that he could go back to the old carefree ways, he would have the answer to all his perplexities. He settled his weight more heavily on his elbows and cocked his head a little, and he knew that he couldn't go back to a single thing. He was cut off for good in time and space and living.

He raised his head and stared through the back bar into some beyond, his fore-

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head wrinkled with the intensity of thought. What could he find again? The smell of pines and water running down from high hills, the crackle of a campfire and the smell of meat and coffee cooking over the coals, the sun-baked brassiness of a desert or the melting gold-and-orange of a sunset above distant mountain peaks?

But nothing came out to him from the past that he wanted now, just what hurt and haunted, bringing the realization that he would never be free again. He was free of Belle, but at the cost of always remembering Sam—and Kimbrough. And he understood now that he could never return to all he had put behind. Time and living worked their changes irrevocably. No sunset would ever look the same, no song would ever sound as it had before, no trail would ever lead where it once had led. The changes were not only in blood and bone and flesh; they were in his mind and in his heart.

He was a different man than he had been when he had ridden into this town—a stranger, standing here before a strange bar, looking at the tawny color of whisky through a light-streaked bottle.

LOOKING down at the bottle, he saw that it was almost empty. He looked around the bar and discovered that most of the customers had gone. The barkeep was staring at him, but looked quickly away as Allison caught his eye.

He thought, there has got to be something else for me somewhere.

And then he remembered Lucy, and the very memory of her pushed up in him such a conflict that involuntarily he reached for the bottle again. She was strange—bold as a dancehall girl, and yet in many ways a child, like a girl just growing into lush womanhood who was experimenting with things beyond her depth. Well, she was a fool to do that—with him, anyway.

He poured another glass of whisky and drank of it, and abruptly the resentful thought hit him, damn her, anyhow! Why doesn't she let me alone? I haven't given her any reason to think that I—

He slammed his fist down on the bar with angry emphasis, and at that moment, Doc eased up beside him and said, "You'll not find your answers there, either."

Deliberately, Allison turned and cocked an eye at him. "Dr. Storrow, the philosopher," he said thickly. "Problems solved while you wait."

The bartender was in the rear of the saloon, rousing out the men back there, telling them it was time to go home. Allison heard that, and all at once it came to him that he wasn't going home—he wasn't going anyplace, not hanging there over the bar.

"What's the time?" he asked.

"Eleven," said Doc.

"Can't be. I've finished only one bottle of whisky."

"How long since you've eaten?"

"Eaten?" Bart shook his head. "I can't remember."

"You ought to have some food in your stomach. That hangover you're building will have hair on it."

Allison emptied the bottle into his glass and said, "Doc, did you have some business with me?"

"Yes," said Doc. "I wanted to tell you to stay away from Lucy Summerton. She's waiting to see you, but just go on about your business when you leave. Understand?"

Allison murmured, "You don't have to tell me. I wouldn't touch her with a ten-foot pole. Her or any other woman."

Doc murmured, "Ah. So you've found out that she wasn't worth it?"

"Who?"

"The woman who sent you on Kimbrough's trail."

Allison fixed Doc with a wavering eye, then steadied. "Doc, you want a drink?"

"No."

"I'd like to buy you one. You're a damned nuisance, but I owe it to you anyhow. You hit the nail on the head when you told me I'd find out I was wrong. Well, I have. How did you know that?"

Doc said warily, "I'll tell you when you're sober."

"No. You get drunk. We'd tell the truth then and neither of us would re-

member afterward. Maybe you could tell me why Sam's dead and I'm alive. Maybe you could tell me which man is the worst—the first one that steals a man's wife or the fifth—or the tenth. You're smart, Doc. You're a philosopher. I'm not. Maybe you can tell me these things. Where's yesterday, Doc? Or the day before that or a hundred days beyond that one? How do you get there?"

All at once he stopped, weaving a little, his eyes not focussing on Doc but looking through him. Suddenly he snarled, "Get out! And go tell that Lucy to quit nuzzling up to a whole man!"

Doc said coldly, "You no-good scoundrel!" and stalked out.

UNDECIDED, troubled, Doc stood in the outside darkness. Then he turned and went down the street, and three doors from the saloon Lucy met him from the shadows.

She said, "Did you talk to him?"

He nodded.

"He's pretty drunk," Doc said. "He shouldn't be alone in this town tonight, because somebody will have it in for him, sure."

"Do you think drinking will help him?"

"He's got a lot of things to drown," Doc said wryly, "and he's got more drink coming up. I know." He paused. "I'm not sure it will help him."

She said softly, "I have to wait, Dad. I have to!"

Doc said slowly, "He's found out something that cuts deep. And he's got to forget a lot of violence, on top of it. He's completely swamped right now, and I'm not sure that there'll be much salvage available when the flood passes."

"I know," she said softly.

"Lucy," he pleaded gently, "come home with me, or go to your mother."

"You've got to understand something, Dad," she said earnestly. "I've got a mind of my own—and a heart. And I'll have to follow it. Please don't be angry."

He shook his head sadly, and his shoul-

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ders drooped as he turned away toward his office. Lucy moved back into the shadows.

Back in the barroom everyone else had gone, but Allison still stood at the bar, glowering at the empty bottle, but thinking of Lucy. He couldn't figure her out. Eager, yet reserved. Frank, yet shy. Doc had a crust to come bothering him about her. He, Bart Allison, wanted no part of her. He wanted no part of any woman. Women tripped a man up, made him form false judgments, made him do things that no man ought to do, and when he'd gone in too deep they turned out to be wrong ones, and when they got through with a man all that was left of him was a lot of—nothing.

Gus came ambling up, growling resentfully, "I've got to close some time. How about pulling your freight?"

Allison pulled himself straight. "I have to go, too."

He took a couple of silver dollars from his pocket and laid them on the bar with his fist doubled around them so they wouldn't fall. He opened his hand carefully and shoveled them across, and let his hand lie there.

You're drunk, he thought, and turned and felt the whole room turning. He took a sight on the door and staggered away from the bar, then got control of himself and walked a careful, straight line to the door and out, without a word to Gus.

Almost sedately, he paused on the walk, and a kind of satisfaction came to him. He hadn't folded up, and he did feel better. Maybe he'd stay this way.

And then the fresh darkness lifted a wind through the street, and some of the anesthesia evaporated, and he could hear, like trumpets blaring, the words Kim-brought had spoken. "Cheap revenge—cheap revenge—"

He groaned. Doc had been right; Sam had been right. His whole life had been wasted by his three years of clinging mulishly to the wrong idea. There was nothing to pick up out of the wreckage, nor any place to make a new start, because not only

had he killed everything in his path, but he had destroyed everything in himself.

HE TURNED, lurching a little, and made his weaving way toward the livery stable. He'd leave. This was a dead town—people mourning their dead; ideas dead; dreams dead. Nothing was alive in himself but a mistake.

And then, abruptly, there was someone real before him. Lucy Summerton was standing in the shadow of a building and watching him as he pulled up.

He said, with bibulous precision, "I know who you are. You're Lucy Summerton—the girl who thinks she's got everything."

"I never said that."

"Same thing," he muttered. "You're good for everything that's wrong with a man. That's the idea."

"You *are* cruel," she said, and the pain in her tone cut through his alcoholic haze.

He peered at her a little closer. "You know," he drawled, "I missed one thing. I ought to have messed up your life, too, when I had the chance. That'd have made it perfect. Me and Kimbrough."

"Where are you going?" she asked.

"For a ride. I'm a rider, see? I ride after people—three years at a time."

She said, "Come with me. I'll get you some coffee and sober you up. You're sick."

"Why, that's so," he said. "I am sick. What's the matter with me?"

She took him by the arm. "We'll go to Doc's," she said softly.

"Look," Allison muttered, "you stay away from me. How many times have I told you that already? When you kiss a man, you dig into his brain until he can't get you loose. I don't want a woman like that—not any more."

"You never had a woman like me," she told him steadily. "I'm not the kind to turn from a man I love. Even if he were away from me a hundred years, I'd be his when he came back, and no one else's."

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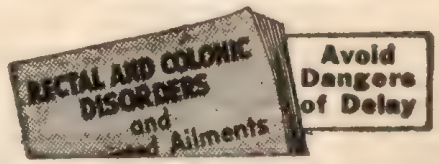

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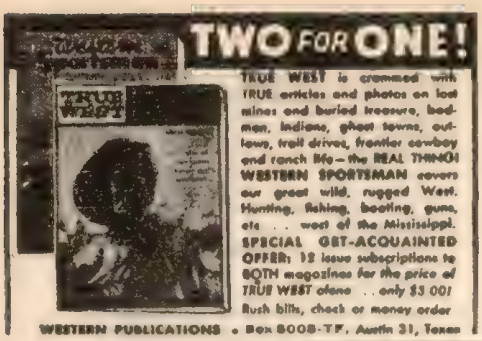
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DEL MONTE
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He shook his head. "No woman is like that. Get out of my way."

SHE stood there in the shadows, knowing defeat. Then she moved up the the street after him, not knowing what to do, and feeling a terrible loneliness.

He was in the stable now, and in a moment he rode out and turned his horse's head downstreet past her.

She called softly after him, "Will you come back—some time?"

He pulled up. He had a little trouble locating where she stood, and then he sat his saddle, peering at her.

He said, his voice thick and deliberate, "I'm never coming back. I never want to see this town again. I never want to see you again. You've got too strong a pull on a man, even at first sight. What would it be after a man held you in his arms and made love to you?"

He could not see the expression of mingled pride, and a deep happiness that was almost a triumph, that suddenly glowed in her eyes. He didn't even know that she had started to say something, for the bullet caught him squarely in the back and threw him forward on the horn, and the horse leaped and would have run had Lucy not made a dash and caught the reins.

The blast of the shot rolled through the town, and in a moment people were running into the streets. But by then Lucy was pulling down the horse and catching Allison as his hands fumblingly left the horn, as he slipped from the leather and fell to the ground.

Over Allison's lolling head as she clutched him in her arms she saw Ruby James standing on the walk, a smoking revolver in her hand, her face pinched and bitter, her eyes tragic with grief. For an instant their eyes met—the eyes of two women who had loved and lost.

As Doc came quickly across the dust and others crowded around, Lucy's clear voice rang out. "I understand, Ruby. I would have done the same thing, for this one."

Some men helped Doc carry Allison over to his office. After some time, during

which Lucy merely stood in the street and looked down at the blood in the dust at her feet, the men who had helped Doc came out to the street again. Then she went up to Doc's office.

He looked up from dressing the wound and saw Lucy in the doorway. He said nothing, went on with his work.

A thousand thoughts were filling her mind as she stood there. Bart was stretched on the table, his shirt off, and his body was white and strong, with long, flat muscling. She was afraid to ask whether he would live or die, but murmured a heartfelt prayer. It didn't matter that Doc—her father now—didn't like him. She knew better than he did what was inside Bart Allison, what had driven him to do what he had, the powerful depth of devotion that had first twisted him, then let him down, and at last had brought him to this.

She thought, he loved her that much. What could he be like with a woman who wanted him—only him—always?

Doc straightened up, rolling down his sleeves. Frowning a little more, he regarded her. As he saw the light in her eyes, his frown deepened.

"He'll be as good as new in a month," he muttered. "His lung's punctured, but he's a boot-tough customer." And then wryly, "That's what you want, isn't it?"

"That's all I'll ever want," she said, her head lifting proudly. "I want him. I have everything else."

He looked at her closely, realizing at last that in only a few hours she had grown up. He shook his head. She would have her way.

"How do you know he won't pull out the minute he's able to travel?" he asked.

"I'm sure he won't," she murmured. "I have kissed him. And he kissed me. He'll never forget that."

She didn't say—for there was no need—that she would make him forget all the old hateful memories. She would give him something to live for, to be good for—an all-embracing love like he had once thought was his.

THE END

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WHOM SHALL I MARRY?

by Professor MARCUS MARI

MAN OF AQUARIUS
JAN. 21 — FEB. 19

DURING 1954 the men born under the powerful sign of Aquarius will celebrate their birthdays with a number of happenings that shaped the West. One is the birthday into the Union of the territory of Kansas, that became a State on Jan. 29th, 1861.

It is odd to note that Oregon's birthday is even earlier—Feb. 14th, 1859—inasmuch as that land is so much farther west of Kansas. And Colorado, under the Organic Act of Territories, celebrates its birthday during the month of February, having been born in 1861.

Men of Aquarius are individualists; they do not attempt to conform to the pattern of the men about them. They are free and they are proud, and their feelings toward their loved ones are profound and moving forces in their lives. They will suffer almost any indignity or hardship for their nearest and dearest.

Their sign, the Water Bearer, ruled by Uranus, gives them constancy and steadiness. Sudden impulses and unreasoned behavior have little part in their lives because they are inclined to think before they speak or act, and strive to acquire wisdom so that their ideas can be relied upon.

Aquarius men have a hard-headed belief in personal freedom, but they have no tolerance at all with moral slackness or ineptitude, and should take this into consideration when choosing a mate for life. They need—and give in return—good-natured solidity.

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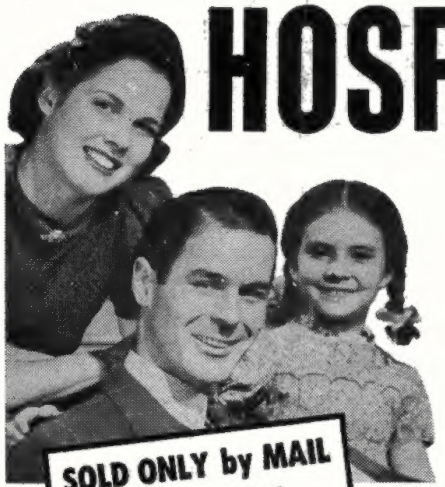

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